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Christie Classics

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By AGATHA CHRISTIE

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THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD
AND THEN THERE WERE NONE
THE WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION
PHILOMEL COTTAGE
THREE BLIND MICE

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The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

CHAPTER I

DR. SHEPPARD AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE

MRS. FERRARS died on the night of the 16th-17th September—a Thursday. I was sent for at eight o'clock on the morning of Friday the 17th. There was nothing to be done. She had been dead some hours.

It was just a few minutes after nine when I reached home once more. I opened the front door with my latchkey, and purposely delayed a few moments in the hall, hanging up my hat and the light overcoat that I had deemed a wise precaution against the chill of an early autumn morning. To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so. But my instinct told me that there were stirring times ahead.

From the dining-room on my left there came the rattle of tea-cups and the short, dry cough of my sister Caroline.

"Is that you, James?" she called.

An unnecessary question, since who else could it be? To tell the truth, it was precisely my sister Caroline who was the cause of my few minutes' delay. The motto of the mongoose family, so Mr. Kipling tells us, is: "Go and find out." If Caroline ever adopts a crest, I should certainly suggest a mongoose rampant. One might omit the first part of the motto. Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home. I don't know how she manages it, but there it is. I suspect that the servants and the tradesmen constitute her Intelligence Corps. When she goes out, it is not to gather in information, but to spread it. At that, too, she is amazingly expert.

It was really this last named trait of hers which was causing me these pangs of indecision. Whatever I told Caroline now concerning the demise of Mrs. Ferrars would be common knowledge all over the village within the space of an hour and a half. As a professional man, I naturally aim at discretion. Therefore I have got into the habit of continually withholding all information possible from my sister. She usually finds out just the same, but I have the moral satisfaction of knowing that I am in no way to blame.

Mrs. Ferrars's husband died just over a year ago, and Caroline has constantly asserted, without the least foundation for the assertion, that his wife poisoned him.

She scorns my invariable rejoinder that Mr. Ferrars died of acute gastritis, helped on by habitual over-indulgence in alcoholic beverages. The symptoms

of gastritis and arsenical poisoning are not, I agree, unlike, but Caroline bases her accusation on quite different lines.

"You've only got to look at her," I have heard her say.

Mrs. Ferrars, though not in her first youth, was a very attractive woman, and her clothes, though simple, always seemed to fit her very well, but all the same, lots of women buy their clothes in Paris and have not, on that account, necessarily poisoned their husbands.

As I stood hesitating in the hall, with all this passing through my mind, Caroline's voice came again, with a sharper note in it.

"What on earth are you doing out there, James? Why don't you come and get your breakfast?"

"Just coming, my dear," I said hastily. "I've been hanging up my overcoat."

"You could have hung up half a dozen overcoats in this time."

She was quite right. I could have.

I walked into the dining-room, gave Caroline the accustomed peck on the cheek, and sat down to eggs and bacon. The bacon was rather cold.

"You've had an early call," remarked Caroline.

"Yes," I said. "King's Paddock. Mrs. Ferrars."

"I know," said my sister.

"How did you know?"

"Annie told me."

Annie is the house parlormaid. A nice girl, but an inveterate talker.

There was a pause. I continued to eat eggs and bacon. My sister's nose, which is long and thin, quivered a little at the tip, as it always does when she is interested or excited over anything.

"Well?" she demanded.

"A bad business. Nothing to be done. Must have died in her sleep."

"I know," said my sister again.

This time I was annoyed.

"You can't know," I snapped. "I didn't know myself until I got there, and I haven't mentioned it to a soul yet. If that girl Annie knows, she must be a clairvoyant."

"It wasn't Annie who told me. It was the milkman. He had it from the Ferrars' cook."

As I say, there is no need for Caroline to go out to get information. She sits at home, and it comes to her.

My sister continued:

"What did she die of? Heart failure?"

"Didn't the milkman tell you that?" I inquired sarcastically.

Sarcasm is wasted on Caroline. She takes it seriously and answers accordingly.

"He didn't know," she explained.

After all, Caroline was bound to hear sooner or later. She might as well hear from me.

"She died of an overdose of veronal. She's been taking it lately for sleeplessness. Must have taken too much."

"Nonsense," said Caroline immediately. "She took it on purpose. Don't tell me!"

It is odd how, when you have a secret belief of your own which you do not wish to acknowledge, the voicing of it by some one else will rouse you to a fury of denial. I burst immediately into indignant speech.

"There you go again," I said. "Rushing along without rhyme or reason. Why on earth should Mrs. Ferrars wish to commit suicide? A widow, fairly young still, very well off, good health, and nothing to do but enjoy life. It's absurd."

"Not at all. Even you must have noticed how different she has been looking lately. It's been coming on for the last six months. She's looked positively hag-ridden. And you have just admitted that she hasn't been able to sleep."

"What is your diagnosis?" I demanded coldly. "An unfortunate love affair, I suppose?"

My sister shook her head.

"Remorse," she said, with great gusto.

"Remorse?"

"Yes. You never would believe me when I told you she poisoned her husband. I'm more than ever convinced of it now."

"I don't think you're very logical," I objected. "Surely if a woman committed a crime like murder, she'd be sufficiently cold-blooded to enjoy the fruits of it without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance."

Caroline shook her head.

"There probably are women like that—but Mrs. Ferrars wasn't one of them. She was a mass of nerves. An overmastering impulse drove her on to get rid of her husband because she was the sort of person who simply can't endure suffering of any kind, and there's no doubt that the wife of a man like Ashley Ferrars must have had to suffer a good deal——"

I nodded.

"And ever since she's been haunted by what she did. I can't help feeling sorry for her."

I don't think Caroline ever felt sorry for Mrs. Ferrars whilst she was alive. Now that she has gone where (presumably) Paris frocks can no longer be worn, Caroline is prepared to indulge in the softer emotions of pity and comprehension.

I told her firmly that her whole idea was nonsense. I was all the more firm because I secretly agreed with some part, at least, of what she had said. But it is all wrong that Caroline should arrive at the truth simply by a kind of

inspired guesswork. I wasn't going to encourage that sort of thing. She will go round the village airing her views, and every one will think that she is doing so on medical data supplied by me. Life is very trying.

"Nonsense," said Caroline, in reply to my strictures. "You'll see. Ten to one she's left a letter confessing everything."

"She didn't leave a letter of any kind," I said sharply, and not seeing where the admission was going to land me.

"Oh!" said Caroline. "So you *did* inquire about that, did you? I believe, James, that in your heart of hearts, you think very much as I do. You're a precious old humbug."

"One always has to take the possibility of suicide into consideration," I said repressively.

"Will there be an inquest?"

"There may be. It all depends. If I am able to declare myself absolutely satisfied that the overdose was taken accidentally, an inquest might be dispensed with."

"And are you absolutely satisfied?" asked my sister shrewdly.

I did not answer, but got up from table.

CHAPTER II

WHO'S WHO IN KING'S ABBOT

BEFORE I proceed further with what I said to Caroline and what Caroline said to me, it might be as well to give some idea of what I should describe as our local geography. Our village, King's Abbot, is, I imagine, very much like any other village. Our big town is Cranchester, nine miles away. We have a large railway station, a small post office, and two rival "General Stores." Able-bodied men are apt to leave the place early in life, but we are rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers. Our hobbies and recreations can be summed up in the one word, "gossip."

There are only two houses of any importance in King's Abbot. One is King's Paddock, left to Mrs. Ferrars by her late husband. The other, Fernly Park, is owned by Roger Ackroyd. Ackroyd has always interested me by being a man more impossibly like a country squire than any country squire could really be. He reminds one of the red-faced sportsmen who always appeared early in the first act of an old-fashioned musical comedy, the setting being the village green. They usually sang a song about going up to London. Nowadays we have revues, and the country squire has died out of musical fashion.

Of course, Ackroyd is not really a country squire. He is an immensely successful manufacturer of (I think) wagon wheels. He is a man of nearly fifty years of age, rubicund of face and genial of manner. He is hand and glove

with the vicar, subscribes liberally to parish funds (though rumor has it that he is extremely mean in personal expenditure), encourages cricket matches, Lads' Clubs, and Disabled Soldiers' Institutes. He is, in fact, the life and soul of our peaceful village of King's Abbot.

Now when Roger Ackroyd was a lad of twenty-one, he fell in love with, and married, a beautiful woman some five or six years his senior. Her name was Paton, and she was a widow with one child. The history of the marriage was short and painful. To put it bluntly, Mrs. Ackroyd was a dipsomaniac. She succeeded in drinking herself into her grave four years after her marriage.

In the years that followed, Ackroyd showed no disposition to make a second matrimonial adventure. His wife's child by her first marriage was only seven years old when his mother died. He is now twenty-five. Ackroyd has always regarded him as his own son, and has brought him up accordingly, but he has been a wild lad and a continual source of worry and trouble to his stepfather. Nevertheless we are all very fond of Ralph Paton in King's Abbot. He is such a good-looking youngster for one thing.

As I said before, we are ready enough to gossip in our village. Everybody noticed from the first that Ackroyd and Mrs. Ferrars got on very well together. After her husband's death, the intimacy became more marked. They were always seen about together, and it was freely conjectured that at the end of her period of mourning, Mrs. Ferrars would become Mrs. Roger Ackroyd. It was felt, indeed, that there was a certain fitness in the thing. Roger Ackroyd's wife had admittedly died of drink. Ashley Ferrars had been a drunkard for many years before his death. It was only fitting that these two victims of alcoholic excess should make up to each other for all that they had previously endured at the hands of their former spouses.

The Ferrars only came to live here just over a year ago, but a halo of gossip has surrounded Ackroyd for many years past. All the time that Ralph Paton was growing up to manhood, a series of lady housekeepers presided over Ackroyd's establishment, and each in turn was regarded with lively suspicion by Caroline and her cronies. It is not too much to say that for at least fifteen years the whole village has confidently expected Ackroyd to marry one of his housekeepers. The last of them, a redoubtable lady called Miss Russell, has reigned undisputed for five years, twice as long as any of her predecessors. It is felt that but for the advent of Mrs. Ferrars, Ackroyd could hardly have escaped. That—and one other factor—the unexpected arrival of a widowed sister-in-law with her daughter from Canada. Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, widow of Ackroyd's ne'er-do-well younger brother, has taken up her residence at Fernly Park, and has succeeded, according to Caroline, in putting Miss Russell in her proper place.

I don't know exactly what a "proper place" constitutes—it sounds chilly and unpleasant—but I know that Miss Russell goes about with pinched lips,

and what I can only describe as an acid smile, and that she professes the utmost sympathy for "poor Mrs. Ackroyd—dependent on the charity of her husband's brother. The bread of charity is so bitter, is it not? I should be quite miserable if I did not work for my living."

I don't know what Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd thought of the Ferrars affair when it came on the tapis. It was clearly to her advantage that Ackroyd should remain unmarried. She was always very charming—not to say gushing—to Mrs. Ferrars when they met. Caroline says that proves less than nothing.

Such have been our preoccupations in King's Abbot for the last few years. We have discussed Ackroyd and his affairs from every standpoint. Mrs. Ferrars has fitted into her place in the scheme.

Now there has been a rearrangement of the kaleidoscope. From a mild discussion of probable wedding presents, we have been jerked into the midst of tragedy.

Revolving these and sundry other matters in my mind, I went mechanically on my round. I had no cases of special interest to attend, which was, perhaps, as well, for my thoughts returned again and again to the mystery of Mrs. Ferrars's death. Had she taken her own life? Surely, if she had done so, she would have left some word behind to say what she contemplated doing. Women, in my experience, if they once reach the determination to commit suicide, usually wish to reveal the state of mind that led to the fatal action. They covet the limelight.

When had I last seen her? Not for over a week. Her manner then had been normal enough considering—well—considering everything.

Then I suddenly remembered that I had seen her, though not to speak to, only yesterday. She had been walking with Ralph Paton, and I had been surprised because I had had no idea that he was likely to be in King's Abbot. I thought, indeed, that he had quarreled finally with his stepfather. Nothing had been seen of him down here for nearly six months. They had been walking along, side by side, their heads close together, and she had been talking very earnestly.

I think I can safely say that it was at this moment that a foreboding of the future first swept over me. Nothing tangible as yet—but a vague premonition of the way things were setting. That earnest *tête-à-tête* between Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars the day before struck me disagreeably.

I was still thinking of it when I came face to face with Roger Ackroyd. "Sheppard!" he exclaimed. "Just the man I wanted to get hold of. This is a terrible business."

"You've heard then?"

He nodded. He had felt the blow keenly, I could see. His big red cheeks seemed to have fallen in, and he looked a positive wreck of his usual jolly, healthy self.

"It's worse than you know," he said quietly. "Look here, Sheppard, I've got to talk to you. Can you come back with me now?"

"Hardly. I've got three patients to see still, and I must be back by twelve to see my surgery patients."

"Then this afternoon—no, better still, dine to-night. At 7.30? Will that suit you?"

"Yes—I can manage that all right. What's wrong? Is it Ralph?"

I hardly knew why I said that—except, perhaps, that it had so often been Ralph.

Ackroyd stared blankly at me as though he hardly understood. I began to realize that there must be something very wrong indeed somewhere. I had never seen Ackroyd so upset before.

"Ralph?" he said vaguely. "Oh! no, it's not Ralph. Ralph's in London—Damn! Here's old Miss Ganett coming. I don't want to have to talk to her about this ghastly business. See you to-night, Sheppard. Seven-thirty."

I nodded, and he hurried away, leaving me wondering. Ralph in London? But he had certainly been in King's Abbot the preceding afternoon. He must have gone back to town last night or early this morning, and yet Ackroyd's manner had conveyed quite a different impression. He had spoken as though Ralph had not been near the place for months.

I had no time to puzzle the matter out further. Miss Ganett was upon me, thirsting for information. Miss Ganett has all the characteristics of my sister Caroline, but she lacks that unerring aim in jumping to conclusions which lends a touch of greatness to Caroline's maneuvers. Miss Ganett was breathless and interrogatory.

Wasn't it sad about poor dear Mrs. Ferrars? A lot of people were saying she had been a confirmed drug-taker for years. So wicked the way people went about saying things. And yet, the worst of it was, there was usually a grain of truth somewhere in these wild statements. No smoke without fire! They were saying too that Mr. Ackroyd had found out about it, and had broken off the engagement—because there *was* an engagement. She, Miss Ganett, had proof positive of that. Of course I must know all about it—doctors always did—but they never tell?

And all this with a sharp beady eye on me to see how I reacted to these suggestions. Fortunately long association with Caroline has led me to preserve an impassive countenance, and to be ready with small non-committal remarks.

On this occasion I congratulated Miss Ganett on not joining in ill-natured gossip. Rather a neat counterattack, I thought. It left her in difficulties, and before she could pull herself together, I had passed on.

I went home thoughtful, to find several patients waiting for me in the surgery.

I had dismissed the last of them, as I thought, and was just contemplating a few minutes in the garden before lunch when I perceived one more patient waiting for me. She rose and came towards me as I stood somewhat surprised.

I don't know why I should have been, except that there is a suggestion of cast iron about Miss Russell, a something that is above the ills of the flesh.

Ackroyd's housekeeper is a tall woman, handsome but forbidding in appearance. She has a stern eye, and lips that shut tightly, and I feel that if I were an under housemaid or a kitchenmaid I should run for my life whenever I heard her coming.

"Good morning, Dr. Sheppard," said Miss Russell. "I should be much obliged if you would take a look at my knee."

I took a look, but, truth to tell, I was very little wiser when I had done so. Miss Russell's account of vague pains was so unconvincing that with a woman of less integrity of character I should have suspected a trumped-up tale. It did cross my mind for one moment that Miss Russell might have deliberately invented this affection of the knee in order to pump me on the subject of Mrs. Ferrars's death, but I soon saw that there, at least, I had misjudged her. She made a brief reference to the tragedy, nothing more. Yet she certainly seemed disposed to linger and chat.

"Well, thank you very much for this bottle of liniment, doctor," she said at last. "Not that I believe it will do the least good."

I didn't think it would either, but I protested in duty bound. After all, it couldn't do any harm, and one must stick up for the tools of one's trade.

"I don't believe in all these drugs," said Miss Russell, her eyes sweeping over my array of bottles disparagingly. "Drugs do a lot of harm. Look at the cocaine habit."

"Well, as far as that goes——"

"It's very prevalent in high society."

I'm sure Miss Russell knows far more about high society than I do. I didn't attempt to argue with her.

"Just tell me this, doctor," said Miss Russell. "Suppose you are really a slave of the drug habit. Is there any cure?"

One cannot answer a question like that offhand. I gave her a short lecture on the subject, and she listened with close attention. I still suspected her of seeking information about Mrs. Ferrars.

"Now, veronal, for instance——" I proceeded.

But, strangely enough, she didn't seem interested in veronal. Instead she changed the subject, and asked me if it was true that there were certain poisons so rare as to baffle detection.

"Ah!" I said. "You've been reading detective stories."

She admitted that she had.

"The essence of a detective story," I said, "is to have a rare poison—if

possible something from South America, that nobody has ever heard of—something that one obscure tribe of savages use to poison their arrows with. Death is instantaneous, and Western science is powerless to detect it. That is the kind of thing you mean?”

“Yes. Is there really such a thing?”

I shook my head regretfully.

“I’m afraid there isn’t. There’s *cuare*, of course.”

I told her a good deal about *cuare*, but she seemed to have lost interest once more. She asked me if I had any in my poison cupboard, and when I replied in the negative I fancy I fell in her estimation.

She said she must be getting back, and I saw her out at the surgery door just as the luncheon gong went.

I should never have suspected Miss Russell of a fondness for detective stories. It pleases me very much to think of her stepping out of the house-keeper’s room to rebuke a delinquent housemaid, and then returning to a comfortable perusal of *The Mystery of the Seventh Death*, or something of the kind.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WHO GREW VEGETABLE MARROWS

I TOLD Caroline at lunch time that I should be dining at Fernly. She expressed no objection—on the contrary—

“Excellent,” she said. “You’ll hear all about it. By the way, what is the trouble with Ralph?”

“With Ralph?” I said, surprised; “there isn’t any.”

“Then why is he staying at the Three Boars instead of at Fernly Park?”

I did not for a minute question Caroline’s statement that Ralph Paton was staying at the local inn. That Caroline said so was enough for me.

“Ackroyd told me he was in London,” I said. In the surprise of the moment I departed from my valuable rule of never parting with information.

“Oh!” said Caroline. I could see her nose twitching as she worked on this.

“He arrived at the Three Boars yesterday morning,” she said. “And he’s still there. Last night he was out with a girl.”

That did not surprise me in the least. Ralph, I should say, is out with a girl most nights of his life. But I did rather wonder that he chose to indulge in the pastime in King’s Abbot instead of in the gay metropolis.

“One of the barmaids?” I asked.

“No. That’s just it. He went out to meet her. I don’t know who she is.”
(Bitter for Caroline to have to admit such a thing.)

“But I can guess,” continued my indefatigable sister.

I waited patiently.

"His cousin."

"Flora Ackroyd?" I exclaimed in surprise.

Flora Ackroyd is, of course, no relation whatever really to Ralph Paton, but Ralph has been looked upon for so long as practically Ackroyd's own son, that cousinship is taken for granted.

"Flora Ackroyd," said my sister.

"But why not go to Fernly if he wanted to see her?"

"Secretly engaged," said Caroline, with immense enjoyment. "Old Ackroyd won't hear of it, and they have to meet this way."

I saw a good many flaws in Caroline's theory, but I forbore to point them out to her. An innocent remark about our new neighbor created a diversion.

The house next door, The Larches, has recently been taken by a stranger. To Caroline's extreme annoyance, she has not been able to find out anything about him, except that he is a foreigner. The Intelligence Corps has proved a broken reed. Presumably the man has milk and vegetables and joints of meat and occasional whittings just like everybody else, but none of the people who make it their business to supply these things seem to have acquired any information. His name, apparently, is Mr. Porrott—a name which conveys an odd feeling of unreality. The one thing we do know about him is that he is interested in the growing of vegetable marrows.

But that is certainly not the sort of information that Caroline is after. She wants to know where he comes from, what he does, whether he is married, what his wife was, or is, like, whether he has children, what his mother's maiden name was—and so on. Somebody very like Caroline must have invented the questions on passports, I think.

"My dear Caroline," I said. "There's no doubt at all about what the man's profession has been. He's a retired hairdresser. Look at that mustache of his."

Caroline dissented. She said that if the man was a hairdresser, he would have wavy hair—not straight. All hairdressers did.

I cited several hairdressers personally known to me who had straight hair, but Caroline refused to be convinced.

"I can't make him out at all," she said in an aggrieved voice. "I borrowed some garden tools the other day, and he was most polite, but I couldn't get anything out of him. I asked him point blank at last whether he was a Frenchman, and he said he wasn't—and somehow I didn't like to ask him any more."

I began to be more interested in our mysterious neighbor. A man who is capable of shutting up Caroline and sending her, like the Queen of Sheba, empty away must be something of a personality.

"I believe," said Caroline, "that he's got one of those new vacuum cleaners——"

I saw a meditated loan and the opportunity of further questioning gleam-

ing from her eye. I seized the chance to escape into the garden. I am rather fond of gardening. I was busily exterminating dandelion roots when a shout of warning sounded from close by and a heavy body whizzed by my ear and fell at my feet with a repellant squelch. It was a vegetable marrow!

I looked up angrily. Over the wall, to my left, there appeared a face. An egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense mustaches, and a pair of watchful eyes. It was our mysterious neighbor, Mr. Porrott.

He broke at once into fluent apologies.

"I demand of you a thousand pardons, monsieur. I am without defense. For some months now I cultivate the marrows. This morning suddenly I enrage myself with these marrows. I send them to promenade themselves—alas! not only mentally but physically. I seize the biggest. I hurl him over the wall. Monsieur, I am ashamed. I prostrate myself."

Before such profuse apologies, my anger was forced to melt. After all, the wretched vegetable hadn't hit me. But I sincerely hoped that throwing large vegetables over walls was not our new friend's hobby. Such a habit could hardly endear him to us as a neighbor.

The strange little man seemed to read my thoughts.

"Ah! no," he exclaimed. "Do not disquiet yourself. It is not with me a habit. But can you figure to yourself, monsieur, that a man may work towards a certain object, may labor and toil to attain a certain kind of leisure and occupation, and then find that, after all, he yearns for the old busy days, and the old occupations that he thought himself so glad to leave?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "I fancy that that is a common enough occurrence. I myself am perhaps an instance. A year ago I came into a legacy—enough to enable me to realize a dream. I have always wanted to travel, to see the world. Well, that was a year ago, as I said, and—I am still here."

My little neighbor nodded.

"The chains of habit. We work to attain an object, and the object gained, we find that what we miss is the daily toil. And mark you, monsieur, my work was interesting work. The most interesting work there is in the world."

"Yes?" I said encouragingly. For the moment the spirit of Caroline was strong within me.

"The study of human nature, monsieur!"

"Just so," I said kindly.

Clearly a retired hairdresser. Who knows the secrets of human nature better than a hairdresser?

"Also, I had a friend—a friend who for many years never left my side. Occasionally of an imbecility to make one afraid, nevertheless he was very dear to me. Figure to yourself that I miss even his stupidity. His *naïveté*,

his honest outlook, the pleasure of delighting and surprising him by my superior gifts—all these I miss more than I can tell you."

"He died?" I asked sympathetically.

"Not so. He lives and flourishes—but on the other side of the world. He is now in the Argentine."

"In the Argentine," I said enviously.

I have always wanted to go to South America. I sighed, and then looked up to find Mr. Porrott eyeing me sympathetically. He seemed an understanding little man.

"You will go there, yes?" he asked.

I shook my head with a sigh.

"I could have gone," I said, "a year ago. But I was foolish—and worse than foolish—greedy. I risked the substance for the shadow."

"I comprehend," said Mr. Porrott. "You speculated?"

I nodded mournfully, but in spite of myself I felt secretly entertained. This ridiculous little man was so portentously solemn.

"Not the Porcupine Oilfields?" he asked suddenly.

I stared.

"I thought of them, as a matter of fact, but in the end I plumped for gold mine in Western Australia."

My neighbor was regarding me with a strange expression which I could not fathom.

"It is Fate," he said at last.

"What is Fate?" I asked irritably.

"That I should live next to a man who seriously considers Porcupine Oilfields, and also West Australian Gold Mines. Tell me, have you also a penchant for auburn hair?"

I stared at him open-mouthed, and he burst out laughing.

"No, no, it is not the insanity that I suffer from. Make your mind easy. It was a foolish question that I put to you there, for, see you, my friend of whom I spoke was a young man, a man who thought all women good, and most of them beautiful. But you are a man of middle age, a doctor, a man who knows the folly and the vanity of most things in this life of ours. Well, well, we are neighbors. I beg of you to accept and present to your excellent sister my best marrow."

He stooped, and with a flourish produced an immense specimen of the tribe, which I duly accepted in the spirit in which it was offered.

"Indeed," said the little man cheerfully, "this has not been a wasted morning. I have made the acquaintance of a man who in some ways resembles my far-off friend. By the way, I should like to ask you a question. You doubtless know every one in this tiny village. Who is the young man with the very

dark hair and eyes, and the handsome face. He walks with his head flung back, and an easy smile on his lips?"

The description left me in no doubt.

"That must be Captain Ralph Paton," I said slowly.

"I have not seen him about here before?"

"No, he has not been here for some time. But he is the son—adopted son, rather—of Mr. Ackroyd of Fernly Park."

My neighbor made a slight gesture of impatience.

"Of course, I should have guessed. Mr. Ackroyd spoke of him many times."

"You know Mr. Ackroyd?" I said, slightly surprised.

"Mr. Ackroyd knew me in London—when I was at work there. I have asked him to say nothing of my profession down here."

"I see," I said, rather amused by this patent snobbery, as I thought it.

But the little man went on with an almost grandiloquent smirk.

"One prefers to remain incognito. I am not anxious for notoriety. I have not even troubled to correct the local version of my name."

"Indeed," I said, not knowing quite what to say.

"Captain Ralph Paton," mused Mr. Porrott. "And so he is engaged to Mr. Ackroyd's niece, the charming Miss Flora."

"Who told you so?" I asked, very much surprised.

"Mr. Ackroyd. About a week ago. He is very pleased about it—has long desired that such a thing should come to pass, or so I understood from him. I even believe that he brought some pressure to bear upon the young man. That is never wise. A young man should marry to please himself—not to please a stepfather from whom he has expectations."

My ideas were completely upset. I could not see Ackroyd taking a hairdresser into his confidence, and discussing the marriage of his niece and stepson with him. Ackroyd extends a genial patronage to the lower orders, but he has a very great sense of his own dignity. I began to think that Porrott couldn't be a hairdresser after all.

To hide my confusion, I said the first thing that came into my head.

"What made you notice Ralph Paton? His good looks?"

"No, not that alone—though he is unusually good-looking for an Englishman—what your lady novelists would call a Greek god. No, there was something about that young man that I did not understand."

He said the last sentence in a musing tone of voice which made an indefinable impression upon me. It was as though he was summing up the boy by the light of some inner knowledge that I did not share. It was that impression that was left with me, for at that moment my sister's voice called me from the house.

I went in. Caroline had her hat on, and had evidently just come in from the village. She began without preamble.

"I met Mr. Ackroyd."

"Yes?" I said.

"I stopped him, of course, but he seemed in a great hurry, and anxious to get away."

I have no doubt but that that was the case. He would feel towards Caroline much as he had felt towards Miss Ganett earlier in the day—perhaps more so. Caroline is less easy to shake off.

"I asked him at once about Ralph. He was absolutely astonished. Had no idea the boy was down here. He actually said he thought I must have made a mistake. Il A mistake!"

"Ridiculous," I said. "He ought to have known you better."

"Then he went on to tell me that Ralph and Flora are engaged."

"I know that too," I interrupted, with modest pride.

"Who told you?"

"Our new neighbor."

Caroline visibly wavered for a second or two, much as a roulette ball might coyly hover between two numbers. Then she declined the tempting red herring.

"I told Mr. Ackroyd that Ralph was staying at the Three Boars."

"Caroline," I said, "do you never reflect that you might do a lot of harm with this habit of yours of repeating everything indiscriminately?"

"Nonsense," said my sister. "People ought to know things. I consider it my duty to tell them. Mr. Ackroyd was very grateful to me."

"Well?" I said, for there was clearly more to come.

"I think he went straight off to the Three Boars, but if so he didn't find Ralph there."

"No?"

"No. Because as I was coming back through the wood——"

"Coming back through the wood?" I interrupted.

Caroline had the grace to blush.

"It was such a lovely day," she exclaimed. "I thought I would make a little round. The woods with their autumnal tints are so perfect at this time of year."

Caroline does not care a hang for woods at any time of year. Normally she regards them as places where you get your feet damp, and where all kinds of unpleasant things may drop on your head. No, it was good sound mongoose instinct which took her to our local wood. It is the only place adjacent to the village of King's Abbot where you can talk with a young woman unseen by the whole of the village. It adjoins the Park of Fernly.

"Well," I said, "go on."

"As I say, I was just coming back through the wood when I heard voices."

Caroline paused.

"Yes?"

"One was Ralph Paton's—I knew it at once. The other was a girl's. Of course I didn't mean to listen——"

"Of course not," I interjected, with patent sarcasm—which was, however, wasted on Caroline.

"But I simply couldn't help overhearing. The girl said something—I didn't quite catch what it was, and Ralph answered. He sounded very angry. 'My dear girl,' he said. 'Don't you realize that it is quite on the cards the old man will cut me off with a shilling? He's been pretty fed up with me for the last few years. A little more would do it. And we need the dibs, my dear. I shall be a very rich man when the old fellow pops off. He's mean as they make 'em, but he's rolling in money really. I don't want him to go altering his will. You leave it to me, and don't worry.' Those were his exact words. I remember them perfectly. Unfortunately, just then I stepped on a dry twig or something, and they lowered their voices and moved away. I couldn't, of course, go rushing after them, so wasn't able to see who the girl was."

"That must have been most vexing," I said. "I suppose, though, you hurried on to the Three Boars, felt faint, and went into the bar for a glass of brandy, and so were able to see if both the barmaids were on duty?"

"It wasn't a barmaid," said Caroline unhesitatingly. "In fact, I'm almost sure that it was Flora Ackroyd, only——"

"Only it doesn't seem to make sense," I agreed.

"But if it wasn't Flora, who could it have been?"

Rapidly my sister ran over a list of maidens living in the neighborhood, with profuse reasons for and against.

When she paused for breath, I murmured something about a patient, and slipped out.

I proposed to make my way to the Three Boars. It seemed likely that Ralph Paton would have returned there by now.

I knew Ralph very well—better, perhaps, than any one else in King's Abbot, for I had known his mother before him, and therefore I understood much in him that puzzled others. He was, to a certain extent, the victim of heredity. He had not inherited his mother's fatal propensity for drink, but nevertheless he had in him a strain of weakness. As my new friend of this morning had declared, he was extraordinarily handsome. Just on six feet, perfectly proportioned, with the easy grace of an athlete, he was dark, like his mother, with a handsome, sunburnt face always ready to break into a smile. Ralph Paton was of those born to charm easily and without effort. He was self-indulgent and extravagant, with no veneration for anything on earth, but he was lovable nevertheless, and his friends were all devoted to him.

Could I do anything with the boy? I thought I could.

On inquiry at the Three Boars I found that Captain Paton had just come in. I went up to his room and entered unannounced.

For a moment, remembering what I had heard and seen, I was doubtful of my reception, but I need have had no misgivings.

"Why, it's Sheppard! Glad to see you."

He came forward to meet me, hand outstretched, a sunny smile lighting up his face.

"The one person I am glad to see in this infernal place."

I raised my eyebrows.

"What's the place been doing?"

He gave a vexed laugh.

"It's a long story. Things haven't been going well with me, doctor. But have a drink, won't you?"

"Thanks," I said, "I will."

He pressed the bell, then, coming back, threw himself into a chair.

"Not to mince matters," he said gloomily, "I'm in the devil of a mess. In fact, I haven't the least idea what to do next."

"What's the matter?" I asked sympathetically.

"It's my confounded stepfather."

"What has he done?"

"It isn't what he's done yet, but what he's likely to do."

The bell was answered, and Ralph ordered the drinks. When the man had gone again, he sat hunched in the arm-chair, frowning to himself.

"Is it really—serious?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I'm fairly up against it this time," he said soberly.

The unusual ring of gravity in his voice told me that he spoke the truth. It took a good deal to make Ralph grave.

"In fact," he continued, "I can't see my way ahead. . . . I'm damned if I can."

"If I could help—" I suggested diffidently.

But he shook his head very decidedly.

"Good of you, doctor. But I can't let you in on this. I've got to play a lone hand."

He was silent a minute and then repeated in a slightly different tone of voice:—

"Yes—I've got to play a lone hand. . . ."

CHAPTER IV

DINNER AT FERNLY

It was just a few minutes before half-past seven when I rang the front door bell of Fernly Park. The door was opened with admirable promptitude by Parker, the butler.

The night was such a fine one that I had preferred to come on foot. I stepped into the big square hall and Parker relieved me of my overcoat. Just then Ackroyd's secretary, a pleasant young fellow by the name of Raymond, passed through the hall on his way to Ackroyd's study, his hands full of papers.

"Good-evening, doctor. Coming to dine? Or is this a professional call?"

The last was in allusion to my black bag, which I had laid down on the oak chest.

I explained that I expected a summons to a confinement case at any moment, and so had come out prepared for an emergency call. Raymond nodded, and went on his way, calling over his shoulder:—

"Go into the drawing-room. You know the way. The ladies will be down in a minute. I must just take these papers to Mr. Ackroyd, and I'll tell him you're here."

On Raymond's appearance Parker had withdrawn, so I was alone in the hall. I settled my tie, glanced in a large mirror which hung there, and crossed to the door directly facing me, which was, as I knew, the door of the drawing-room.

I noticed, just as I was turning the handle, a sound from within—the shutting down of a window, I took it to be. I noted it, I may say, quite mechanically, without attaching any importance to it at the time.

I opened the door and walked in. As I did so, I almost collided with Miss Russell, who was just coming out. We both apologized.

For the first time I found myself appraising the housekeeper and thinking what a handsome woman she must once have been—indeed, as far as that goes, still was. Her dark hair was unstreaked with gray, and when she had a color, as she had at this minute, the stern quality of her looks was not so apparent.

Quite subconsciously I wondered whether she had been out, for she was breathing hard, as though she had been running.

"I'm afraid I'm a few minutes early," I said.

"Oh! I don't think so. It's gone half-past seven, Dr. Sheppard." She paused a minute before saying, "I—didn't know you were expected to dinner to-night. Mr. Ackroyd didn't mention it."

I received a vague impression that my dining there displeased her in some way, but I couldn't imagine why.

"How's the knee?" I inquired.

"Much the same, thank you, doctor. I must be going now. Mrs. Ackroyd will be down in a moment. I—I only came in here to see if the flowers were all right."

She passed quickly out of the room. I strolled to the window, wondering at her evident desire to justify her presence in the room. As I did so, I saw what, of course, I might have known all the time had I troubled to give my mind to it, namely, that the windows were long French ones opening on the terrace. The sound I had heard, therefore, could not have been that of a window being shut down.

Quite idly, and more to distract my mind from painful thoughts than for any other reason, I amused myself by trying to guess what could have caused the sound in question.

Coals on the fire? No, that was not the kind of noise at all. A drawer of the bureau pushed in? No, not that.

Then my eye was caught by what, I believe, is called a silver table, the lid of which lifts, and through the glass of which you can see the contents. I crossed over to it, studying the things. There were one or two pieces of old silver, a baby shoe belonging to King Charles the First, some Chinese jade figures, and quite a number of African implements and curios. Wanting to examine one of the jade figures more closely, I lifted the lid. It slipped through my fingers and fell.

At once I recognized the sound I had heard. It was this same table lid being shut down gently and carefully. I repeated the action once or twice for my own satisfaction. Then I lifted the lid to scrutinize the contents more closely.

I was still bending over the open silver table when Flora Ackroyd came into the room.

Quite a lot of people do not like Flora Ackroyd, but nobody can help admiring her. And to her friends she can be very charming. The first thing that strikes you about her is her extraordinary fairness. She has the real Scandinavian pale gold hair. Her eyes are blue—blue as the waters of a Norwegian fiord, and her skin is cream and roses. She has square, boyish shoulders and slight hips. And to a jaded medical man it is very refreshing to come across such perfect health.

A simple straightforward English girl—I may be old-fashioned, but I think the genuine article takes a lot of beating.

Flora joined me by the silver table, and expressed heretical doubts as to King Charles I ever having worn the baby shoe.

"And anyway," continued Miss Flora, "all this making a fuss about things

because some one wore or used them seems to me all nonsense. They're not wearing or using them now. The pen that George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss* with—that sort of thing—well, it's only just a pen after all. If you're really keen on George Eliot, why not get *The Mill on the Floss* in a cheap edition and read it."

"I suppose you never read such old out-of-date stuff, Miss Flora?"

"You're wrong, Dr. Sheppard. I love *The Mill on the Floss*."

I was rather pleased to hear it. The things young women read nowadays and profess to enjoy positively frighten me.

"You haven't congratulated me yet, Dr. Sheppard," said Flora. "Haven't you heard?"

She held out her left hand. On the third finger of it was an exquisitely set single pearl.

"I'm going to marry Ralph, you know," she went on. "Uncle is very pleased. It keeps me in the family, you see."

I took both her hands in mine.

"My dear," I said, "I hope you'll be very happy."

"We've been engaged for about a month," continued Flora in her cool voice, "but it was only announced yesterday. Uncle is going to do up Cross-stones, and give it to us to live in, and we're going to pretend to farm. Really, we shall hunt all the winter, town for the season, and then go yachting. I love the sea. And, of course, I shall take a great interest in the parish affairs, and attend all the Mothers' Meetings."

Just then Mrs. Ackroyd rustled in, full of apologies for being late.

I am sorry to say I detest Mrs. Ackroyd. She is all chains and teeth and bones. A most unpleasant woman. She has small pale flinty blue eyes, and however gushing her words may be, those eyes of hers always remain coldly speculative.

I went across to her, leaving Flora by the window. She gave me a handful of assorted knuckles and rings to squeeze, and began talking volubly.

Had I heard about Flora's engagement? So suitable in every way. The dear young things had fallen in love at first sight. Such a perfect pair, he so dark and she so fair.

"I can't tell you, my dear Dr. Sheppard, the relief to a mother's heart."

Mrs. Ackroyd sighed—a tribute to her mother's heart, whilst her eyes remained shrewdly observant of me.

"I was wondering. You are such an old friend of dear Roger's. We know how much he trusts to your judgment. So difficult for me—in my position, as poor Cecil's widow. But there are so many tiresome things—settlements, you know—all that. I fully believe that Roger intends to make settlements upon dear Flora, but, as you know, he is just a *leetle* peculiar about money. Very usual, I've heard, amongst men who are captains of industry. I wondered,

you know, if you could just *sound* him on the subject? Flora is so fond of you. We feel you are quite an old friend, although we have only really known you just over two years."

Mrs. Ackroyd's eloquence was cut short as the drawing-room door opened once more. I was pleased at the interruption. I hate interfering in other people's affairs, and I had not the least intention of tackling Ackroyd on the subject of Flora's settlements. In another moment I should have been forced to tell Mrs. Ackroyd as much.

"You know Major Blunt, don't you, doctor?"

"Yes, indeed," I said.

A lot of people know Hector Blunt—at least by repute. He has shot more wild animals in unlikely places than any man living, I suppose. When you mention him, people say: "Blunt—you don't mean the big game man, do you?"

His friendship with Ackroyd has always puzzled me a little. The two men are so totally dissimilar. Hector Blunt is perhaps five years Ackroyd's junior. They made friends early in life, and though their ways have diverged, the friendship still holds. About once in two years Blunt spends a fortnight at Fernly, and an immense animal's head, with an amazing number of horns which fixes you with a glazed stare as soon as you come inside the front door, is a permanent reminder of the friendship.

Blunt had entered the room now with his own peculiar, deliberate, yet soft-footed tread. He is a man of medium height, sturdily and rather stockily built. His face is almost mahogany-colored, and is peculiarly expressionless. He has gray eyes that give the impression of always watching something that is happening very far away. He talks little, and what he does say is said jerkily, as though the words were forced out of him unwillingly.

He said now: "How are you, Sheppard?" in his usual abrupt fashion, and then stood squarely in front of the fireplace looking over our heads as though he saw something very interesting happening in Timbuctoo.

"Major Blunt," said Flora, "I wish you'd tell me about these African things. I'm sure you know what they all are."

I have heard Hector Blunt described as a woman hater, but I noticed that he joined Flora at the silver table with what might be described as alacrity. They bent over it together.

I was afraid Mrs. Ackroyd would begin talking about settlements again, so I made a few hurried remarks about the new sweet pea. I knew there was a new sweet pea because the *Daily Mail* had told me so that morning. Mrs. Ackroyd knows nothing about horticulture, but she is the kind of woman who likes to appear well-informed about the topics of the day, and she, too, reads the *Daily Mail*. We were able to converse quite intelligently until Ack-

royd and his secretary joined us, and immediately afterwards Parker announced dinner.

My place at table was between Mrs. Ackroyd and Flora. Blunt was on Mrs. Ackroyd's other side, and Geoffrey Raymond next to him.

Dinner was not a cheerful affair. Ackroyd was visibly preoccupied. He looked wretched, and ate next to nothing. Mrs. Ackroyd, Raymond, and I kept the conversation going. Flora seemed affected by her uncle's depression, and Blunt relapsed into his usual taciturnity.

Immediately after dinner Ackroyd slipped his arm through mine and led me off to his study.

"Once we've had coffee, we shan't be disturbed again," he explained. "I told Raymond to see to it that we shouldn't be interrupted."

I studied him quietly without appearing to do so. He was clearly under the influence of some strong excitement. For a minute or two he paced up and down the room, then, as Parker entered with the coffee tray, he sank into an arm-chair in front of the fire.

The study was a comfortable apartment. Book-shelves lined one wall of it. The chairs were big and covered in dark blue leather. A large desk stood by the window and was covered with papers neatly docketed and filed. On a round table were various magazines and sporting papers.

"I've had a return of that pain after food lately," remarked Ackroyd casually, as he helped himself to coffee. "You must give me some more of those tablets of yours."

It struck me that he was anxious to convey the impression that our conference was a medical one. I played up accordingly.

"I thought as much. I brought some up with me."

"Good man. Hand them over now."

"They're in my bag in the hall. I'll get them."

Ackroyd arrested me.

"Don't you trouble. Parker will get them. Bring in the doctor's bag, will you, Parker?"

"Very good, sir."

Parker withdrew. As I was about to speak, Ackroyd threw up his hand.

"Not yet. Wait. Don't you see I'm in such a state of nerves that I can hardly contain myself?"

I saw that plainly enough. And I was very uneasy. All sorts of forebodings assailed me.

Ackroyd spoke again almost immediately.

"Make certain that window's closed, will you?" he asked.

Somewhat surprised, I got up and went to it. It was not a French window, but one of the ordinary sash type. The heavy blue velvet curtains were drawn in front of it, but the window itself was open at the top.

Parker reëntered the room with my bag while I was still at the window.

"That's all right," I said, emerging again into the room.

"You've put the latch across?"

"Yes, yes. What's the matter with you, Ackroyd?"

The door had just closed behind Parker, or I would not have put the question.

Ackroyd waited just a minute before replying.

"I'm in hell," he said slowly, after a minute. "No, don't bother with those damned tablets. I only said that for Parker. Servants are so curious. Come here and sit down. The door's closed too, isn't it?"

"Yes. Nobody can overhear; don't be uneasy."

"Sheppard, nobody knows what I've gone through in the last twenty-four hours. If a man's house ever fell in ruins about him, mine has about me. This business of Ralph's is the last straw. But we won't talk about that now. It's the other—the other—I don't know what to do about it. And I've got to make up my mind soon."

"What's the trouble?"

Ackroyd remained silent for a minute or two. He seemed curiously averse to begin. When he did speak, the question he asked came as a complete surprise. It was the last thing I expected.

"Sheppard, you attended Ashley Ferrars in his last illness, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

He seemed to find even greater difficulty in framing his next question.

"Did you never suspect—did it ever enter your head—that—well, that he might have been poisoned?"

I was silent for a minute or two. Then I made up my mind what to say. Roger Ackroyd was not Caroline.

"I'll tell you the truth," I said. "At the time I had no suspicion whatever, but since—well, it was mere idle talk on my sister's part that first put the idea into my head. Since then I haven't been able to get it out again. But, mind you, I've no foundation whatever for that suspicion."

"He *was* poisoned," said Ackroyd.

He spoke in a dull heavy voice.

"Who by?" I asked sharply.

"His wife."

"How do you know that?"

"She told me so herself."

"When?"

"Yesterday! My God! yesterday! It seems ten years ago."

I waited a minute, and then he went on.

"You understand, Sheppard, I'm telling you this in confidence. It's to go

no further. I want your advice—I can't carry the whole weight by myself. As I said just now, I don't know what to do."

"Can you tell me the whole story?" I said. "I'm still in the dark. How did Mrs. Ferrars come to make this confession to you?"

"It's like this. Three months ago I asked Mrs. Ferrars to marry me. She refused. I asked her again and she consented, but she refused to allow me to make the engagement public until her year of mourning was up. Yesterday I called upon her, pointed out that a year and three weeks had now elapsed since her husband's death, and that there could be no further objection to making the engagement public property. I had noticed that she had been very strange in her manner for some days. Now, suddenly, without the least warning, she broke down completely. She—she told me everything. Her hatred of her brute of a husband, her growing love for me, and the— the dreadful means she had taken. Poison! My God! It was murder in cold blood."

I saw the repulsion, the horror, in Ackroyd's face. So Mrs. Ferrars must have seen it. Ackroyd is not the type of the great lover who can forgive all for love's sake. He is fundamentally a good citizen. All that was sound and wholesome and law-abiding in him must have turned from her utterly in that moment of revelation.

"Yes," he went on, in a low, monotonous voice, "she confessed everything. It seems that there is one person who has known all along—who has been blackmailing her for huge sums. It was the strain of that that drove her nearly mad."

"Who was the man?"

Suddenly before my eyes there arose the picture of Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars side by side. Their heads so close together. I felt a momentary throb of anxiety. Supposing—oh! but surely that was impossible. I remembered the frankness of Ralph's greeting that very afternoon. Absurd!

"She wouldn't tell me his name," said Ackroyd slowly. "As a matter of fact, she didn't actually say that it was a man. But of course——"

"Of course," I agreed. "It must have been a man. And you've no suspicion at all?"

For answer Ackroyd groaned and dropped his head into his hands.

"It can't be," he said. "I'm mad even to think of such a thing. No, I won't even admit to you the wild suspicion that crossed my mind. I'll tell you this much, though. Something she said made me think that the person in question might be actually among my household—but that can't be so. I must have misunderstood her."

"What did you say to her?" I asked.

"What could I say? She saw, of course, the awful shock it had been to me. And then there was the question, what was my duty in the matter? She

had made me, you see, an accessory after the fact. She saw all that, I think, quicker than I did. I was stunned, you know. She asked me for twenty-four hours—made me promise to do nothing till the end of that time. And she steadfastly refused to give me the name of the scoundrel who had been blackmailing her. I suppose she was afraid that I might go straight off and hammer him, and then the fat would have been in the fire as far as she was concerned. She told me that I should hear from her before twenty-four hours had passed. My God! I swear to you, Sheppard, that it never entered my head what she meant to do. Suicide! And I drove her to it.”

“No, no,” I said. “Don’t take an exaggerated view of things. The responsibility for her death doesn’t lie at your door.”

“The question is, what am I to do now? The poor lady is dead. Why rake up past trouble?”

“I rather agree with you,” I said.

“But there’s another point. How am I to get hold of that scoundrel who drove her to death as surely as if he’d killed her. He knew of the first crime, and he fastened on to it like some obscene vulture. She’s paid the penalty. Is he to go scot-free?”

“I see,” I said slowly. “You want to hunt him down? It will mean a lot of publicity, you know.”

“Yes, I’ve thought of that. I’ve zigzagged to and fro in my mind.”

“I agree with you that the villain ought to be punished, but the cost has got to be reckoned.”

Ackroyd rose and walked up and down. Presently he sank into the chair again.

“Look here, Sheppard, suppose we leave it like this. If no word comes from her, we’ll let the dead things lie.”

“What do you mean by word coming from her?” I asked curiously.

“I have the strongest impression that somewhere or somehow she must have left a message for me—before she went. I can’t argue about it, but there it is.”

I shook my head.

“She left no letter or word of any kind. I asked.”

“Sheppard, I’m convinced that she did. And more, I’ve a feeling that by deliberately choosing death, she wanted the whole thing to come out, if only to be revenged on the man who drove her to desperation. I believe that if I could have seen her then, she would have told me his name and bid me go for him for all I was worth.”

He looked at me.

“You don’t believe in impressions?”

“Oh, yes, I do, in a sense. If, as you put it, word should come from her——”

I broke off. The door opened noiselessly and Parker entered with a salver on which were some letters.

"The evening post, sir," he said, handing the salver to Ackroyd.

Then he collected the coffee cups and withdrew.

My attention, diverted for a moment, came back to Ackroyd. He was staring like a man turned to stone at a long blue envelope. The other letters he had let drop to the floor.

"*Her writing*," he said in a whisper. "She must have gone out and posted it last night, just before—before——"

He ripped open the envelope and drew out a thick enclosure. Then he looked up sharply.

"You're sure you shut the window?" he said.

"Quite sure," I said, surprised. "Why?"

"All this evening I've had a queer feeling of being watched, spied upon. What's that——?"

He turned sharply. So did I. We both had the impression of hearing the latch of the door give ever so slightly. I went across to it and opened it. There was no one there.

"Nerves," murmured Ackroyd to himself.

He unfolded the thick sheets of paper, and read aloud in a low voice.

"My dear, my very dear Roger,—A life calls for a life. I see that—I saw it in your face this afternoon. So I am taking the only road open to me. I leave to you the punishment of the person who has made my life a hell upon earth for the last year. I would not tell you the name this afternoon, but I propose to write it to you now. I have no children or near relations to be spared, so do not fear publicity. If you can, Roger, my very dear Roger, forgive me the wrong I meant to do you, since when the time came, I could not do it after all. . . ."

Ackroyd, his finger on the sheet to turn it over, paused.

"Sheppard, forgive me, but I must read this alone," he said unsteadily. "It was meant for my eyes, and my eyes only."

He put the letter in the envelope and laid it on the table.

"Later, when I am alone."

"No," I cried impulsively, "read it now."

Ackroyd stared at me in some surprise.

"I beg your pardon," I said, reddening. "I do not mean read it aloud to me. But read it through whilst I am still here."

Ackroyd shook his head.

"No, I'd rather wait."

But for some reason, obscure to myself, I continued to urge him.

"At least, read the name of the man," I said.

Now Ackroyd is essentially pig-headed. The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is not to do it. All my arguments were in vain.

The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. With a shake of the head I passed out and closed the door behind me.

I was startled by seeing the figure of Parker close at hand. He looked embarrassed, and it occurred to me that he might have been listening at the door.

What a fat, smug, oily face the man had, and surely there was something decidedly shiftily in his eye.

"Mr. Ackroyd particularly does not want to be disturbed," I said coldly. "He told me to tell you so."

"Quite so, sir. I—I fancied I heard the bell ring."

This was such a palpable untruth that I did not trouble to reply. Preceding me to the hall, Parker helped me on with my overcoat, and I stepped out into the night. The moon was overcast and everything seemed very dark and still. The village church clock chimed nine o'clock as I passed through the lodge gates. I turned to the left towards the village, and almost cannoned into a man coming in the opposite direction.

"This the way to Fernly Park, mister?" asked the stranger in a hoarse voice.

I looked at him. He was wearing a hat pulled down over his eyes, and his coat collar turned up. I could see little or nothing of his face, but he seemed a young fellow. The voice was rough and uneducated.

"These are the lodge gates here," I said.

"Thank you, mister." He paused, and then added, quite unnecessarily, "I'm a stranger in these parts, you see."

He went on, passing through the gates as I turned to look after him.

The odd thing was that his voice reminded me of some one's voice that I knew, but whose it was I could not think.

Ten minutes later I was at home once more. Caroline was full of curiosity to know why I had returned so early. I had to make up a slightly fictitious account of the evening in order to satisfy her, and I had an uneasy feeling that she saw through the transparent device.

At ten o'clock I rose, yawned, and suggested bed. Caroline acquiesced.

It was Friday night, and on Friday night I wind the clocks. I did it as usual, whilst Caroline satisfied herself that the servants had locked up the kitchen properly.

It was a quarter past ten as we went up the stairs. I had just reached the top when the telephone rang in the hall below.

"Mrs. Bates," said Caroline immediately.

"I'm afraid so," I said ruefully.

I ran down the stairs and took up the receiver.

"What?" I said. "*What?* Certainly, I'll come at once."

I ran upstairs, caught up my bag, and stuffed a few extra dressings into it.

"Parker telephoning," I shouted to Caroline, "from Fernly. They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered."

CHAPTER V

MURDER

I got out the car in next to no time, and drove rapidly to Fernly. Jumping out, I pulled the bell impatiently. There was some delay in answering, and I rang again.

Then I heard the rattle of the chain and Parker, his impassivity of countenance quite unmoved, stood in the open doorway.

I pushed past him into the hall.

"Where is he?" I demanded sharply.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Your master. Mr. Ackroyd. Don't stand there staring at me, man. Have you notified the police?"

"The police, sir? Did you say the police?" Parker stared at me as though I were a ghost.

"What's the matter with you, Parker? If, as you say, your master has been murdered——"

A gasp broke from Parker.

"The master? Murdered? Impossible, sir!"

It was my turn to stare.

"Didn't you telephone to me, not five minutes ago, and tell me that Mr. Ackroyd had been found murdered?"

"Me, sir? Oh! no indeed, sir. I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing."

"Do you mean to say it's all a hoax? That there's nothing the matter with Mr. Ackroyd?"

"Excuse me, sir, did the person telephoning use my name?"

"I'll give you the exact words I heard. '*Is that Dr. Sheppard? Parker, the butler at Fernly, speaking. Will you please come at once, sir. Mr. Ackroyd has been murdered.*'"

Parker and I stared at each other blankly.

"A very wicked joke to play, sir," he said at last, in a shocked tone. "Fancy saying a thing like that."

"Where is Mr. Ackroyd?" I asked suddenly.

"Still in the study, I fancy, sir. The ladies have gone to bed, and Major Blunt and Mr. Raymond are in the billiard room."

"I think I'll just look in and see him for a minute," I said. "I know he didn't want to be disturbed again, but this odd practical joke has made me uneasy. I'd just like to satisfy myself that he's all right."

"Quite so, sir. It makes me feel quite uneasy myself. If you don't object to my accompanying you as far as the door, sir—?"

"Not at all," I said. "Come along."

I passed through the door on the right, Parker on my heels, traversed the little lobby where a small flight of stairs led upstairs to Ackroyd's bedroom, and tapped on the study door.

There was no answer. I turned the handle, but the door was locked.

"Allow me, sir," said Parker.

Very nimbly, for a man of his build, he dropped on one knee and applied his eye to the keyhole.

"Key is in the lock all right, sir," he said, rising. "On the inside. Mr. Ackroyd must have locked himself in and possibly just dropped off to sleep."

I bent down and verified Parker's statement.

"It seems all right," I said, "but, all the same, Parker, I'm going to wake your master up. I shouldn't be satisfied to go home without hearing from his own lips that he's quite all right."

So saying, I rattled the handle and called out, "Ackroyd, Ackroyd, just a minute."

But still there was no answer. I glanced over my shoulder.

"I don't want to alarm the household," I said hesitatingly.

Parker went across and shut the door from the big hall through which we had come.

"I think that will be all right now, sir. The billiard room is at the other side of the house, and so are the kitchen quarters and the ladies' bedrooms."

I nodded comprehendingly. Then I banged once more frantically on the door, and stooping down, fairly bawled through the keyhole:—

"Ackroyd, Ackroyd! It's Sheppard. Let me in."

And still—silence. Not a sign of life from within the locked room. Parker and I glanced at each other.

"Look here, Parker," I said, "I'm going to break this door in—or rather, we are. I'll take the responsibility."

"If you say so, sir," said Parker, rather doubtfully.

"I do say so. I'm seriously alarmed about Mr. Ackroyd."

I looked round the small lobby and picked up a heavy oak chair. Parker and I held it between us and advanced to the assault. Once, twice, and

three times we hurled it against the lock. At the third blow it gave, and we staggered into the room.

Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him in the arm-chair before the fire. His head had fallen sideways, and clearly visible, just below the collar of his coat, was a shining piece of twisted metalwork.

Parker and I advanced till we stood over the recumbent figure. I heard the butler draw in his breath with a sharp hiss.

"Stabbed from be'ind," he murmured. "'Orrible!"

He wiped his moist brow with his handkerchief, then stretched out a hand gingerly towards the hilt of the dagger.

"You mustn't touch that," I said sharply. "Go at once to the telephone and ring up the police station. Inform them of what has happened. Then tell Mr. Raymond and Major Blunt."

"Very good, sir."

Parker hurried away, still wiping his perspiring brow.

I did what little had to be done. I was careful not to disturb the position of the body, and not to handle the dagger at all. No object was to be attained by moving it. Ackroyd had clearly been dead some little time.

Then I heard young Raymond's voice, horror-stricken and incredulous, outside.

"What do you say? Oh! impossible! Where's the doctor?"

He appeared impetuously in the doorway, then stopped dead, his face very white. A hand put him aside, and Hector Blunt came past him into the room.

"My God!" said Raymond from behind him; "it's true, then."

Blunt came straight on till he reached the chair. He bent over the body, and I thought that, like Parker, he was going to lay hold of the dagger hilt. I drew him back with one hand.

"Nothing must be moved," I explained. "The police must see him exactly as he is now."

Blunt nodded in instant comprehension. His face was expressionless as ever, but I thought I detected signs of emotion beneath the stolid mask. Geoffrey Raymond had joined us now, and stood peering over Blunt's shoulder at the body.

"This is terrible," he said in a low voice.

He had regained his composure, but as he took off the pince-nez he habitually wore and polished them I observed that his hand was shaking.

"Robbery, I suppose," he said. "How did the fellow get in? Through the window? Has anything been taken?"

He went towards the desk.

"You think it's burglary?" I said slowly.

"What else could it be? There's no question of suicide, I suppose?"

"No man could stab himself in such a way," I said confidently. "It's murder right enough. But with what motive?"

"Roger hadn't an enemy in the world," said Blunt quietly. "Must have been burglars. But what was the thief after? Nothing seems to be disarranged."

He looked round the room. Raymond was still sorting the papers on the desk.

"There seems nothing missing, and none of the drawers show signs of having been tampered with," the secretary observed at last. "It's very mysterious."

Blunt made a slight motion with his head.

"There are some letters on the floor here," he said.

I looked down. Three or four letters still lay where Ackroyd had dropped them earlier in the evening.

But the blue envelope containing Mrs. Ferrars's letter had disappeared. I half opened my mouth to speak, but at that moment the sound of a bell pealed through the house. There was a confused murmur of voices in the hall, and then Parker appeared with our local inspector and a police constable.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," said the inspector. "I'm terribly sorry for this! A good kind gentleman like Mr. Ackroyd. The butler says it is murder. No possibility of accident or suicide, doctor?"

"None whatever," I said.

"Ah! A bad business."

He came and stood over the body.

"Been moved at all?" he asked sharply.

"Beyond making certain that life was extinct—an easy matter—I have not disturbed the body in any way."

"Ah! And everything points to the murderer having got clear away—for the moment, that is. Now then, let me hear all about it. Who found the body?"

I explained the circumstances carefully.

"A telephone message, you say? From the butler?"

"A message that I never sent," declared Parker earnestly. "I've not been near the telephone the whole evening. The others can bear me out that I haven't."

"Very odd, that. Did it sound like Parker's voice, doctor?"

"Well—I can't say I noticed. I took it for granted, you see."

"Naturally. Well, you got up here, broke in the door, and found poor Mr. Ackroyd like this. How long should you say he had been dead, doctor?"

"Half an hour at least—perhaps longer," I said.

"The door was locked on the inside, you say? What about the window?"

"I myself closed and bolted it earlier in the evening at Mr. Ackroyd's request."

The inspector strode across to it and threw back the curtains.

"Well, it's open now anyway," he remarked.

True enough, the window was open, the lower sash being raised to its fullest extent.

The inspector produced a pocket torch and flashed it along the sill outside.

"This is the way he went all right," he remarked, "*and* got in. See here."

In the light of the powerful torch, several clearly defined footmarks could be seen. They seemed to be those of shoes with rubber studs in the soles. One particularly clear one pointed inwards, another, slightly overlapping it, pointed outwards.

"Plain as a pikestaff," said the inspector. "Any valuables missing?"

Geoffrey Raymond shook his head.

"Not so that we can discover. Mr. Ackroyd never kept anything of particular value in this room."

"H'm," said the inspector. "Man found an open window. Climbed in, saw Mr. Ackroyd sitting there—maybe he'd fallen asleep. Man stabbed him from behind, then lost his nerve and made off. But he's left his tracks pretty clearly. We ought to get hold of *him* without much difficulty. No suspicious strangers been hanging about anywhere?"

"Oh!" I said suddenly.

"What is it, doctor?"

"I met a man this evening—just as I was turning out of the gate. He asked me the way to Fernly Park."

"What time would that be?"

"Just nine o'clock. I heard it chime the hour as I was turning out of the gate."

"Can you describe him?"

I did so to the best of my ability.

The inspector turned to the butler.

"Any one answering that description come to the front door?"

"No, sir. No one has been to the house at all this evening."

"What about the back?"

"I don't think so, sir, but I'll make inquiries."

He moved towards the door, but the inspector held up a large hand.

"No, thanks. I'll do my own inquiring. But first of all I want to fix the time a little more clearly. When was Mr. Ackroyd last seen alive?"

"Probably by me," I said, "when I left at—let me see—about ten minutes to nine. He told me that he didn't wish to be disturbed, and I repeated the order to Parker."

"Just so, sir," said Parker respectfully.

"Mr. Ackroyd was certainly alive at half-past nine," put in Raymond, "for I heard his voice in here talking."

"Who was he talking to?"

"That I don't know. Of course, at the time I took it for granted that it was Dr. Sheppard who was with him. I wanted to ask him a question about some papers I was engaged upon, but when I heard the voices I remembered that he had said he wanted to talk to Dr. Sheppard without being disturbed, and I went away again. But now it seems that the doctor had already left?"

I nodded.

"I was at home by a quarter past nine," I said. "I didn't go out again until I received the telephone call."

"Who could have been with him at half-past nine?" queried the inspector. "It wasn't you, Mr.—er—"

"Major Blunt," I said.

"Major Hector Blunt?" asked the inspector, a respectful tone creeping into his voice.

Blunt merely jerked his head affirmatively.

"I think we've seen you down here before, sir," said the inspector. "I didn't recognize you for the moment, but you were staying with Mr. Ackroyd a year ago last May."

"June," corrected Blunt.

"Just so, June it was. Now, as I was saying, it wasn't you with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty this evening?"

Blunt shook his head.

"Never saw him after dinner," he volunteered.

The inspector turned once more to Raymond.

"You didn't overhear any of the conversation going on, did you, sir?"

"I did catch just a fragment of it," said the secretary, "and, supposing as I did that it was Dr. Sheppard who was with Mr. Ackroyd, that fragment struck me as distinctly odd. As far as I can remember, the exact words were these. Mr. Ackroyd was speaking. 'The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late—that is what he was saying—'of late, that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request. . . .' I went away again at once, of course, so did not hear any more. But I rather wondered because Dr. Sheppard——"

"——Does not ask for loans for himself or subscriptions for others," I finished.

"A demand for money," said the inspector musingly. "It may be that here we have a very important clew." He turned to the butler. "You say, Parker, that nobody was admitted by the front door this evening?"

"That's what I say, sir."

"Then it seems almost certain that Mr. Ackroyd himself must have admitted this stranger. But I don't quite see——"

The inspector went into a kind of day-dream for some minutes.

"One thing's clear," he said at length, rousing himself from his absorption.

"Mr. Ackroyd was alive and well at nine-thirty. That is the last moment at which he is known to have been alive."

Parker gave vent to an apologetic cough which brought the inspector's eyes on him at once.

"Well?" he said sharply.

"If you'll excuse me, sir, Miss Flora saw him after that."

"Miss Flora?"

"Yes, sir. About a quarter to ten that would be. It was after that that she told me Mr. Ackroyd wasn't to be disturbed again to-night."

"Did he send her to you with that message?"

"Not exactly, sir. I was bringing a tray with soda and whisky when Miss Flora, who was just coming out of this room, stopped me and said her uncle didn't want to be disturbed."

The inspector looked at the butler with rather closer attention than he had bestowed on him up to now.

"You'd already been told that Mr. Ackroyd didn't want to be disturbed, hadn't you?"

Parker began to stammer. His hands shook.

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Quite so, sir."

"And yet you were proposing to do so?"

"I'd forgotten, sir. At least I mean, I always bring the whisky and soda about that time, sir, and ask if there's anything more, and I thought—well, I was doing as usual without thinking."

It was at this moment that it began to dawn upon me that Parker was most suspiciously flustered. The man was shaking and twitching all over.

"H'm," said the inspector. "I must see Miss Ackroyd at once. For the moment we'll leave this room exactly as it is. I can return here after I've heard what Miss Ackroyd has to tell me. I shall just take the precaution of shutting and bolting the window."

This precaution accomplished, he led the way into the hall and we followed him. He paused a moment, as he glanced up at the little staircase, then spoke over his shoulder to the constable.

"Jones, you'd better stay here. Don't let any one go into that room."

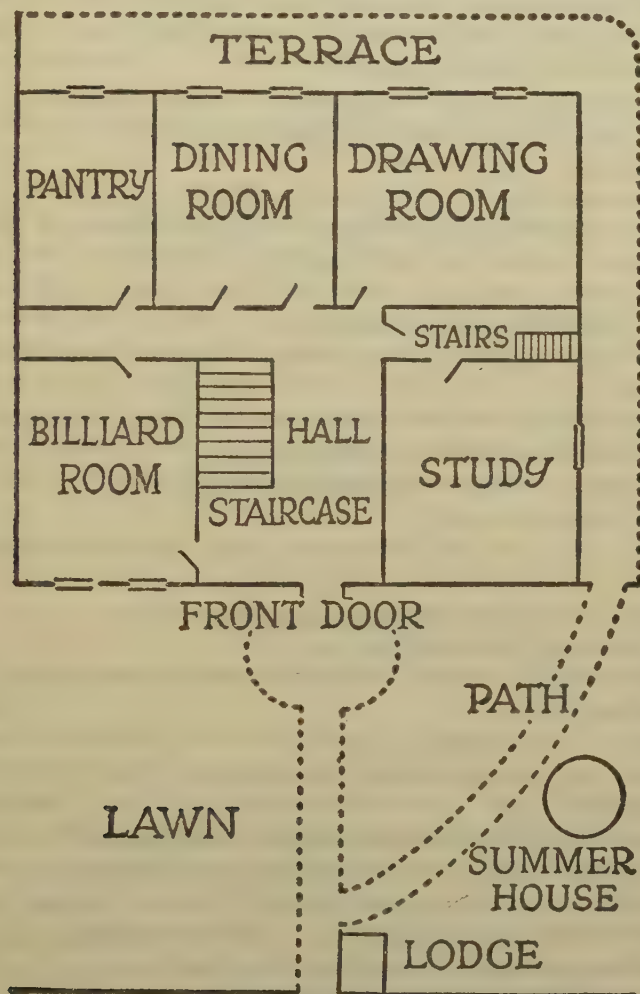
Parker interposed deferentially.

"If you'll excuse me, sir. If you were to lock the door into the main hall, nobody could gain access to this part. That staircase leads only to Mr. Ackroyd's bedroom and bathroom. There is no communication with the other part of the house. There once was a door through, but Mr. Ackroyd had it blocked up. He liked to feel that his suite was entirely private."

To make things clear and explain the position, I have appended a rough sketch of the right-hand wing of the house. The small staircase leads, as

Parker explained, to a big bedroom (made by two being knocked into one) and an adjoining bathroom and lavatory.

The inspector took in the position at a glance. We went through into the large hall and he locked the door behind him, slipping the key into his



pocket. Then he gave the constable some low-voiced instructions, and the latter prepared to depart.

"We must get busy on those shoe tracks," explained the inspector. "But first of all, I must have a word with Miss Ackroyd. She was the last person to see her uncle alive. Does she know yet?"

Raymond shook his head.

"Well, no need to tell her for another five minutes. She can answer my questions better without being upset by knowing the truth about her uncle. Tell her there's been a burglary, and ask her if she would mind dressing and coming down to answer a few questions."

It was Raymond who went upstairs on this errand.

"Miss Ackroyd will be down in a minute," he said, when he returned. "I told her just what you suggested."

In less than five minutes Flora descended the staircase. She was wrapped in a pale pink silk kimono. She looked anxious and excited.

The inspector stepped forward.

"Good-evening, Miss Ackroyd," he said civilly. "We're afraid there's been an attempt at robbery, and we want you to help us. What's this room—the billiard room? Come in here and sit down."

Flora sat down composedly on the wide divan which ran the length of the wall, and looked up at the inspector.

"I don't quite understand. What has been stolen? What do you want me to tell you?"

"It's just this, Miss Ackroyd. Parker here says you came out of your uncle's study at about a quarter to ten. Is that right?"

"Quite right. I had been to say good-night to him."

"And the time is correct?"

"Well, it must have been about then. I can't say exactly. It might have been later."

"Was your uncle alone, or was there any one with him?"

"He was alone. Dr. Sheppard had gone."

"Did you happen to notice whether the window was open or shut?"

Flora shook her head.

"I can't say. The curtains were drawn."

"Exactly. And your uncle seemed quite as usual?"

"I think so."

"Do you mind telling us exactly what passed between you?"

Flora paused a minute, as though to collect her recollections.

"I went in and said, 'Good-night, uncle, I'm going to bed now. I'm tired to-night.' He gave a sort of grunt, and—I went over and kissed him, and he said something about my looking nice in the frock I had on, and then he told me to run away as he was busy. So I went."

"Did he ask specially not to be disturbed?"

"Oh! yes, I forgot. He said: 'Tell Parker I don't want anything more to-night, and that he's not to disturb me.' I met Parker just outside the door and gave him uncle's message."

"Just so," said the inspector.

"Won't you tell me what it is that has been stolen?"

"We're not quite—certain," said the inspector hesitatingly.

A wide look of alarm came into the girl's eyes. She started up.

"What is it? You're hiding something from me?"

Moving in his usual unobtrusive manner, Hector Blunt came between her and the inspector. She half stretched out her hand, and he took it in both of his, patting it as though she were a very small child, and she turned to him as though something in his stolid, rocklike demeanor promised comfort and safety.

"It's bad news, Flora," he said quietly. "Bad news for all of us. Your Uncle Roger——"

"Yes?"

"It will be a shock to you. Bound to be. Poor Roger's dead."

Flora drew away from him, her eyes dilating with horror.

"When?" she whispered. "When?"

"Very soon after you left him, I'm afraid," said Blunt gravely.

Flora raised her hand to her throat, gave a little cry, and I hurried to catch her as she fell. She had fainted, and Blunt and I carried her upstairs and laid her on her bed. Then I got him to wake Mrs. Ackroyd and tell her the news. Flora soon revived, and I brought her mother to her, telling her what to do for the girl. Then I hurried downstairs again.

CHAPTER VI

THE TUNISIAN DAGGER

I MET the inspector just coming from the door which led into the kitchen quarters.

"How's the young lady, doctor?"

"Coming round nicely. Her mother's with her."

"That's good. I've been questioning the servants. They all declare that no one has been to the back door to-night. Your description of that stranger was rather vague. Can't you give us something more definite to go upon?"

"I'm afraid not," I said regretfully. "It was a dark night, you see, and the fellow had his coat collar well pulled up and his hat squashed down over his eyes."

"H'm," said the inspector. "Looked as though he wanted to conceal his face. Sure it was no one you know?"

I replied in the negative, but not as decidedly as I might have done. I remembered my impression that the stranger's voice was not unfamiliar to me. I explained this rather haltingly to the inspector.

"It was a rough, uneducated voice, you say?"

I agreed, but it occurred to me that the roughness had been of an almost

exaggerated quality. If, as the inspector thought, the man had wished to hide his face, he might equally well have tried to disguise his voice.

"Do you mind coming into the study with me again, doctor? There are one or two things I want to ask you."

I acquiesced. Inspector Davis unlocked the door of the lobby, we passed through, and he locked the door again behind him.

"We don't want to be disturbed," he said grimly. "And we don't want any eavesdropping either. What's all this about blackmail?"

"Blackmail!" I exclaimed, very much startled.

"Is it an effort of Parker's imagination? Or is there something in it?"

"If Parker heard anything about blackmail," I said slowly, "he must have been listening outside this door with his ear glued against the keyhole."

Davis nodded.

"Nothing more likely. You see, I've been instituting a few inquiries as to what Parker has been doing with himself this evening. To tell the truth, I didn't like his manner. The man knows something. When I began to question him, he got the wind up, and plumped out some garbled story of blackmail."

I took an instant decision.

"I'm rather glad you've brought the matter up," I said. "I've been trying to decide whether to make a clean breast of things or not. I'd already practically decided to tell you everything, but I was going to wait for a favorable opportunity. You might as well have it now."

And then and there I narrated the whole events of the evening as I have set them down here. The inspector listened keenly, occasionally interjecting a question.

"Most extraordinary story I ever heard," he said, when I had finished. "And you say that letter has completely disappeared? It looks bad—it looks very bad indeed. It gives us what we've been looking for—a motive for the murder."

I nodded.

"I realize that."

"You say that Mr. Ackroyd hinted at a suspicion he had that some member of his household was involved? Household's rather an elastic term."

"You don't think that Parker himself might be the man we're after?" I suggested.

"It looks very like it. He was obviously listening at the door when you came out. Then Miss Ackroyd came across him later bent on entering the study. Say he tried again when she was safely out of the way. He stabbed Ackroyd, locked the door on the inside, opened the window, and got out that way, and went round to a side door which he had previously left open. How's that?"

"There's only one thing against it," I said slowly. "If Ackroyd went on

reading that letter as soon as I left, as he intended to do, I don't see him continuing to sit on here and turn things over in his mind for another hour. He'd have had Parker in at once, accused him then and there, and there would have been a fine old uproar. Remember, Ackroyd was a man of choleric temper."

"Mightn't have had time to go on with the letter just then," suggested the inspector. "We know some one was with him at half-past nine. If that visitor turned up as soon as you left, and after he went, Miss Ackroyd came in to say good-night—well, he wouldn't be able to go on with the letter until close upon ten o'clock."

"And the telephone call?"

"Parker sent that all right—perhaps before he thought of the locked door and open window. Then he changed his mind—or got in a panic—and decided to deny all knowledge of it. That was it, depend upon it."

"Ye-es," I said rather doubtfully.

"Anyway, we can find out the truth about the telephone call from the exchange. If it was put through from here, I don't see how any one else but Parker could have sent it. Depend upon it, he's our man. But keep it dark—we don't want to alarm him just yet, till we've got all the evidence. I'll see to it he doesn't give us the slip. To all appearances we'll be concentrating on your mysterious stranger."

He rose from where he had been sitting astride the chair belonging to the desk, and crossed over to the still form in the arm-chair.

"The weapon ought to give us a clew," he remarked, looking up. "It's something quite unique—a curio, I should think, by the look of it."

He bent down, surveying the handle attentively, and I heard him give a grunt of satisfaction. Then, very gingerly, he pressed his hands down below the hilt and drew the blade out from the wound. Still carrying it so as not to touch the handle, he placed it in a wide china mug which adorned the mantelpiece.

"Yes," he said, nodding at it. "Quite a work of art. There can't be many of them about."

It was indeed a beautiful object. A narrow, tapering blade, and a hilt of elaborately intertwined metals of curious and careful workmanship. He touched the blade gingerly with his finger, testing its sharpness, and made an appreciative grimace.

"Lord, what an edge," he exclaimed. "A child could drive that into a man—as easy as cutting butter. A dangerous sort of toy to have about."

"May I examine the body properly now?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Go ahead."

I made a thorough examination.

"Well?" said the inspector, when I had finished.

"I'll spare you the technical language," I said. "We'll keep that for the inquest. The blow was delivered by a right-handed man standing behind him, and death must have been instantaneous. By the expression on the dead man's face, I should say that the blow was quite unexpected. He probably died without knowing who his assailant was."

"Butlers can creep about as soft-footed as cats," said Inspector Davis. "There's not going to be much mystery about this crime. Take a look at the hilt of that dagger."

I took the look.

"I dare say they're not apparent to you, but I can see them clearly enough." He lowered his voice. "*Fingerprints!*"

He stood off a few steps to judge of his effect.

"Yes," I said mildly. "I guessed that."

I do not see why I should be supposed to be totally devoid of intelligence. After all, I read detective stories, and the newspapers, and am a man of quite average ability. If there had been toe marks on the dagger handle, now, that would have been quite a different thing. I would then have registered any amount of surprise and awe.

I think the inspector was annoyed with me for declining to get thrilled. He picked up the china mug and invited me to accompany him to the billiard room.

"I want to see if Mr. Raymond can tell us anything about this dagger," he explained.

Locking the outer door behind us again, we made our way to the billiard room, where we found Geoffrey Raymond. The inspector held up his exhibit.

"Ever seen this before, Mr. Raymond?"

"Why—I believe—I'm almost sure that is a curio given to Mr. Ackroyd by Major Blunt. It comes from Morocco—no, Tunis. So the crime was committed with that? What an extraordinary thing. It seems almost impossible, and yet there could hardly be two daggers the same. May I fetch Major Blunt?"

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried off.

"Nice young fellow that," said the inspector. "Something honest and ingenuous about him."

I agreed. In the two years that Geoffrey Raymond has been secretary to Ackroyd, I have never seen him ruffled or out of temper. And he has been, I know, a most efficient secretary.

In a minute or two Raymond returned, accompanied by Blunt.

"I was right," said Raymond excitedly. "It is the Tunisian dagger."

"Major Blunt hasn't looked at it yet," objected the inspector.

"Saw it the moment I came into the study," said the quiet man.

"You recognized it then?"

Blunt nodded.

"You said nothing about it," said the inspector suspiciously.

"Wrong moment," said Blunt. "Lot of harm done by blurting out things at the wrong time."

He returned the inspector's stare placidly enough.

The latter grunted at last and turned away. He brought the dagger over to Blunt.

"You're quite sure about it, sir. You identify it positively?"

"Absolutely. No doubt whatever."

"Where was this—er—curio usually kept? Can you tell me that, sir?"

It was the secretary who answered.

"In the silver table in the drawing-room."

"What?" I exclaimed.

The others looked at me.

"Yes, doctor?" said the inspector encouragingly.

"It's nothing."

"Yes, doctor?" said the inspector again, still more encouragingly.

"It's so trivial," I explained apologetically. "Only that when I arrived last night for dinner I heard the lid of the silver table being shut down in the drawing-room."

I saw profound skepticism and a trace of suspicion on the inspector's countenance.

"How did you know it was the silver table lid?"

I was forced to explain in detail—a long, tedious explanation which I would infinitely rather not have had to make.

The inspector heard me to the end.

"Was the dagger in its place when you were looking over the contents?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I can't say I remember noticing it—but, of course, it may have been there all the time."

"We'd better get hold of the housekeeper," remarked the inspector, and pulled the bell.

A few minutes later Miss Russell, summoned by Parker, entered the room.

"I don't think I went near the silver table," she said, when the inspector had posed his question. "I was looking to see that all the flowers were fresh. Oh! yes, I remember now. The silver table was open—which it had no business to be, and I shut the lid down as I passed."

She looked at him aggressively.

"I see," said the inspector. "Can you tell me if this dagger was in its place then?"

Miss Russell looked at the weapon composedly.

"I can't say, I'm sure," she replied. "I didn't stop to look. I knew the family would be down any minute, and I wanted to get away."

"Thank you," said the inspector.

There was just a trace of hesitation in his manner, as though he would have liked to question her further, but Miss Russell clearly accepted the words as a dismissal, and glided from the room.

"Rather a Tartar, I should fancy, eh?" said the inspector, looking after her. "Let me see. This silver table is in front of one of the windows, I think you said, doctor?"

Raymond answered for me.

"Yes, the left-hand window."

"And the window was open?"

"They were both ajar."

"Well, I don't think we need go into the question much further. Somebody—I'll just say somebody—could get that dagger any time he liked, and exactly when he got it doesn't matter in the least. I'll be coming up in the morning with the chief constable, Mr. Raymond. Until then, I'll keep the key of that door. I want Colonel Melrose to see everything exactly as it is. I happen to know that he's dining out the other side of the county, and, I believe, staying the night. . . ."

We watched the inspector take up the jar.

"I shall have to pack this carefully," he observed. "It's going to be an important piece of evidence in more ways than one."

A few minutes later as I came out of the billiard room with Raymond, the latter gave a low chuckle of amusement.

I felt the pressure of his hand on my arm, and followed the direction of his eyes. Inspector Davis seemed to be inviting Parker's opinion of a small pocket diary.

"A little obvious," murmured my companion. "So Parker is the suspect, is he? Shall we oblige Inspector Davis with a set of our fingerprints also?"

He took two cards from the card tray, wiped them with his silk handkerchief, then handed one to me and took the other himself. Then, with a grin, he handed them to the police inspector.

"Souvenirs," he said. "No. 1, Dr. Sheppard; No. 2, my humble self. One from Major Blunt will be forthcoming in the morning."

Youth is very buoyant. Even the brutal murder of his friend and employer could not dim Geoffrey Raymond's spirits for long. Perhaps that is as it should be. I do not know. I have lost the quality of resilience long since myself.

It was very late when I got back, and I hoped that Caroline would have gone to bed. I might have known better.

She had hot cocoa waiting for me, and whilst I drank it, she extracted

the whole history of the evening from me. I said nothing of the blackmailing business, but contented myself with giving her the facts of the murder.

"The police suspect Parker," I said, as I rose to my feet and prepared to ascend to bed. "There seems a fairly clear case against him."

"Parker!" said my sister. "Fiddlesticks! That inspector must be a perfect fool. Parker indeed! Don't tell me."

With which obscure pronouncement we went up to bed.

CHAPTER VII

I LEARN MY NEIGHBOR'S PROFESSION

ON THE following morning I hurried unforgivably over my round. My excuse can be that I had no very serious cases to attend. On my return Caroline came into the hall to greet me.

"Flora Ackroyd is here," she announced in an excited whisper.

"What?"

I concealed my surprise as best I could.

"She's very anxious to see you. She's been here half an hour."

Caroline led the way into our small sitting-room, and I followed.

Flora was sitting on the sofa by the window. She was in black and she sat nervously twisting her hands together. I was shocked by the sight of her face. All the color had faded away from it. But when she spoke her manner was as composed and resolute as possible.

"Dr. Sheppard, I have come to ask you to help me?"

"Of course he'll help you, my dear," said Caroline.

I don't think Flora really wished Caroline to be present at the interview. She would, I am sure, have infinitely preferred to speak to me privately. But she also wanted to waste no time, so she made the best of it.

"I want you to come to The Larches with me."

"The Larches?" I queried, surprised.

"To see that funny little man?" exclaimed Caroline.

"Yes. You know who he is, don't you?"

"We fancied," I said, "that he might be a retired hairdresser."

Flora's blue eyes opened very wide.

"Why, he's Hercule Poirot! You know who I mean—the private detective. They say he's done the most wonderful things—just like detectives do in books. A year ago he retired and came to live down here. Uncle knew who he was, but he promised not to tell any one, because M. Poirot wanted to live quietly without being bothered by people."

"So that's who he is," I said slowly.

"You've heard of him, of course?"

"I'm rather an old fogey, as Caroline tells me," I said, "but I *have* just heard of him."

"Extraordinary!" commented Caroline.

I don't know what she was referring to—possibly her own failure to discover the truth.

"You want to go and see him?" I asked slowly. "Now why?"

"To get him to investigate this murder, of course," said Caroline sharply. "Don't be so stupid, James."

I was not really being stupid. Caroline does not always understand what I am driving at.

"You haven't got confidence in Inspector Davis?" I went on.

"Of course she hasn't," said Caroline. "I haven't either."

Any one would have thought it was Caroline's uncle who had been murdered.

"And how do you know he would take up the case?" I asked. "Remember he has retired from active work."

"That's just it," said Flora simply. "I've got to persuade him."

"You are sure you are doing wisely?" I asked gravely.

"Of course she is," said Caroline. "I'll go with her myself if she likes."

"I'd rather the doctor came with me if you don't mind, Miss Sheppard," said Flora.

She knows the value of being direct on certain occasions. Any hints would certainly have been wasted on Caroline.

"You see," she explained, following directness with tact, "Dr. Sheppard being the doctor, and having found the body, he would be able to give all the details to M. Poirot."

"Yes," said Caroline grudgingly, "I see that."

I took a turn or two up and down the room.

"Flora," I said gravely, "be guided by me. I advise you not to drag this detective into the case."

Flora sprang to her feet. The color rushed into her cheeks.

"I know why you say that," she cried. "But it's exactly for that reason I'm so anxious to go. You're afraid! But I'm not. I know Ralph better than you do."

"Ralph," said Caroline. "What has Ralph got to do with it?"

Neither of us heeded her.

"Ralph may be weak," continued Flora. "He may have done foolish things in the past—wicked things even—but he wouldn't murder any one."

"No, no," I exclaimed. "I never thought it of him."

"Then why did you go to the Three Boars last night?" demanded Flora, "on your way home—after uncle's body was found?"

I was momentarily silenced. I had hoped that that visit of mine would remain unnoticed.

"How did you know about that?" I countered.

"I went there this morning," said Flora. "I heard from the servants that Ralph was staying there——"

I interrupted her.

"You had no idea that he was in King's Abbot?"

"No. I was astounded. I couldn't understand it. I went there and asked for him. They told me, what I suppose they told you last night, that he went out at about nine o'clock yesterday evening—and—and never came back."

Her eyes met mine defiantly, and as though answering something in my look, she burst out:—

"Well, why shouldn't he? He might have gone—anywhere. He may even have gone back to London."

"Leaving his luggage behind?" I asked gently.

Flora stamped her foot.

"I don't care. There must be a simple explanation."

"And that's why you want to go to Hercule Poirot? Isn't it better to leave things as they are? The police don't suspect Ralph in the least, remember. They're working on quite another tack."

"But that's just it," cried the girl. "They *do* suspect him. A man from Cranchester turned up this morning—Inspector Raglan, a horrid, weaselly little man. I found he had been to the Three Boars this morning before me. They told me all about his having been there, and the questions he had asked. He must think Ralph did it."

"That's a change of mind from last night, if so," I said slowly. "He doesn't believe in Davis's theory that it was Parker then?"

"Parker indeed," said my sister, and snorted.

Flora came forward and laid her hand on my arm.

"Oh! Dr. Sheppard, let us go at once to this M. Poirot. He will find out the truth."

"My dear Flora," I said gently, laying my hand on hers. "Are you quite sure it is the truth we want?"

She looked at me, nodding her head gravely.

"You're not sure," she said. "I am. I know Ralph better than you do."

"Of course he didn't do it," said Caroline, who had been keeping silent with great difficulty. "Ralph may be extravagant, but he's a dear boy, and has the nicest manners."

I wanted to tell Caroline that large numbers of murderers have had nice manners, but the presence of Flora restrained me. Since the girl was determined, I was forced to give in to her and we started at once, getting away

before my sister was able to fire off any more pronouncements beginning with her favorite words, "Of course."

An old woman with an immense Breton cap opened the door of The Larches to us. M. Poirot was at home, it seemed.

We were ushered into a little sitting-room arranged with formal precision, and there, after the lapse of a minute or so, my friend of yesterday came to us.

"Monsieur le docteur," he said, smiling. "Mademoiselle."

He bowed to Flora.

"Perhaps," I began, "you have heard of the tragedy which occurred last night."

His face grew grave.

"But certainly I have heard. It is horrible. I offer mademoiselle all my sympathy. In what way can I serve you?"

"Miss Ackroyd," I said, "wants you to—to—"

"To find the murderer," said Flora in a clear voice.

"I see," said the little man. "But the police will do that, will they not?"

"They might make a mistake," said Flora. "They are on their way to make a mistake now, I think. Please, M. Poirot, won't you help us? If—if it is a question of money——"

Poirot held up his hand.

"Not that, I beg of you, mademoiselle. Not that I do not care for money." His eyes showed a momentary twinkle. "Money, it means much to me and always has done. No, if I go into this, you must understand one thing clearly. *I shall go through with it to the end.* The good dog, he does not leave the scent, remember! You may wish that, after all, you had left it to the local police."

"I want the truth," said Flora, looking him straight in the eyes.

"All the truth?"

"All the truth."

"Then I accept," said the little man quietly. "And I hope you will not regret those words. Now, tell me all the circumstances."

"Dr. Sheppard had better tell you," said Flora. "He knows more than I do."

Thus enjoined, I plunged into a careful narrative, embodying all the facts I have previously set down. Poirot listened carefully, inserting a question here and there, but for the most part sitting in silence, his eyes on the ceiling.

I brought my story to a close with the departure of the inspector and myself from Fernly Park the previous night.

"And now," said Flora, as I finished, "tell him all about Ralph."

I hesitated, but her imperious glance drove me on.

"You went to this inn—this Three Boars—last night on your way home?" asked Poirot, as I brought my tale to a close. "Now exactly why was that?"

I paused a moment to choose my words carefully.

"I thought some one ought to inform the young man of his stepfather's death. It occurred to me after I had left Fernly that possibly no one but myself and Mr. Ackroyd were aware that he was staying in the village."

Poirot nodded.

"Quite so. That was your only motive in going there, eh?"

"That was my only motive," I said stiffly.

"It was not to—shall we say—reassure yourself about *ce jeune homme*?"

"Reassure myself?"

"I think, M. le docteur, that you know very well what I mean, though you pretend not to do so. I suggest that it would have been a relief to you if you had found that Captain Paton had been at home all the evening."

"Not at all," I said sharply.

The little detective shook his head at me gravely.

"You have not the trust in me of Miss Flora," he said. "But no matter. What we have to look at is this—Captain Paton is missing, under circumstances which call for an explanation. I will not hide from you that the matter looks grave. Still, it may admit of a perfectly simple explanation."

"That's just what I keep saying," cried Flora eagerly.

Poirot touched no more upon that theme. Instead he suggested an immediate visit to the local police. He thought it better for Flora to return home, and for me to be the one to accompany him there and introduce him to the officer in charge of the case.

We carried out this plan forthwith. We found Inspector Davis outside the police station looking very glum indeed. With him was Colonel Melrose, the Chief Constable, and another man whom, from Flora's description of "weaselly," I had no difficulty in recognizing as Inspector Raglan from Cranchester.

I know Melrose fairly well, and I introduced Poirot to him and explained the situation. The chief constable was clearly vexed, and Inspector Raglan looked as black as thunder. Davis, however, seemed slightly exhilarated by the sight of his superior officer's annoyance.

"The case is going to be plain as a pikestaff," said Raglan. "Not the least need for amateurs to come butting in. You'd think any fool would have seen the way things were last night, and then we shouldn't have lost twelve hours."

He directed a vengeful glance at poor Davis, who received it with perfect stolidity.

"Mr. Ackroyd's family must, of course, do what they see fit," said Colonel Melrose. "But we cannot have the official investigation hampered in any way. I know M. Poirot's great reputation, of course," he added courteously.

"The police can't advertise themselves, worse luck," said Raglan.

It was Poirot who saved the situation.

"It is true that I have retired from the world," he said. "I never intended to take up a case again. Above all things, I have a horror of publicity. I must beg, that in the case of my being able to contribute something to the solution of the mystery, my name may not be mentioned."

Inspector Raglan's face lightened a little.

"I've heard of some very remarkable successes of yours," observed the colonel, thawing.

"I have had much experience," said Poirot quietly. "But most of my successes have been obtained by the aid of the police. I admire enormously your English police. If Inspector Raglan permits me to assist him, I shall be both honored and flattered."

The inspector's countenance became still more gracious.

Colonel Melrose drew me aside.

"From all I hear, this little fellow's done some really remarkable things," he murmured. "We're naturally anxious not to have to call in Scotland Yard. Raglan seems very sure of himself, but I'm not quite certain that I agree with him. You see, I—er—know the parties concerned better than he does. This fellow doesn't seem out after kudos, does he? Would work in with us unobtrusively, eh?"

"To the greater glory of Inspector Raglan," I said solemnly.

"Well, well," said Colonel Melrose breezily in a louder voice, "we must put you wise to the latest developments, M. Poirot."

"I thank you," said Poirot. "My friend, Dr. Sheppard, said something of the butler being suspected?"

"That's all bunkum," said Raglan instantly. "These high-class servants get in such a funk that they act suspiciously for nothing at all."

"The fingerprints?" I hinted.

"Nothing like Parker's." He gave a faint smile, and added: "And yours and Mr. Raymond's don't fit either, doctor."

"What about those of Captain Ralph Paton?" asked Poirot quietly.

I felt a secret admiration for the way he took the bull by the horns. I saw a look of respect creep into the inspector's eye.

"I see you don't let the grass grow under your feet, Mr. Poirot. It will be a pleasure to work with you, I'm sure. We're going to take that young gentleman's fingerprints as soon as we can lay hands upon him."

"I can't help thinking you're mistaken, inspector," said Colonel Melrose warmly. "I've known Ralph Paton from a boy upward. He'd never stoop to murder."

"Maybe not," said the inspector tonelessly.

"What have you got against him?" I asked.

"Went out just on nine o'clock last night. Was seen in neighborhood of Fernly Park somewhere about nine-thirty. Not been seen since. Believed to

be in serious money difficulties. I've got a pair of his shoes here—shoes with rubber studs in them. He had two pairs, almost exactly alike. I'm going up now to compare them with those footmarks. The constable is up there seeing that no one tampers with them."

"We'll go at once," said Colonel Melrose. "You and M. Poirot will accompany us, will you not?"

We assented, and all drove up in the colonel's car. The inspector was anxious to get at once to the footmarks, and asked to be put down at the lodge. About half-way up the drive, on the right, a path branched off which led round to the terrace and the window of Ackroyd's study.

"Would you like to go with the inspector, M. Poirot?" asked the chief constable, "or would you prefer to examine the study?"

Poirot chose the latter alternative. Parker opened the door to us. His manner was smug and deferential, and he seemed to have recovered from his panic of the night before.

Colonel Melrose took a key from his pocket, and unlocking the door which led into the lobby, he ushered us through into the study.

"Except for the removal of the body, M. Poirot, this room is exactly as it was last night."

"And the body was found—where?"

As precisely as possible, I described Ackroyd's position. The arm-chair still stood in front of the fire.

Poirot went and sat down in it.

"The blue letter you speak of, where was it when you left the room?"

"Mr. Ackroyd had laid it down on this little table at his right hand."

Poirot nodded.

"Except for that, everything was in its place?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Colonel Melrose, would you be so extremely obliging as to sit down in this chair a minute. I thank you. Now, M. le docteur, will you kindly indicate to me the exact position of the dagger?"

I did so, whilst the little man stood in the doorway.

"The hilt of the dagger was plainly visible from the door then. Both you and Parker could see it at once?"

"Yes."

Poirot went next to the window.

"The electric light was on, of course, when you discovered the body?" he asked over his shoulder.

I assented, and joined him where he was studying the marks on the window-sill.

"The rubber studs are the same pattern as those in Captain Paton's shoes," he said quietly.

Then he came back once more to the middle of the room. His eye traveled round, searching everything in the room with a quick, trained glance.

"Are you a man of good observation, Dr. Sheppard?" he asked at last.

"I think so," I said, surprised.

"There was a fire in the grate, I see. When you broke the door down and found Mr. Ackroyd dead, how was the fire? Was it low?"

I gave a vexed laugh.

"I—I really can't say. I didn't notice. Perhaps Mr. Raymond or Major Blunt—"

The little man opposite me shook his head with a faint smile.

"One must always proceed with method. I made an error of judgment in asking you that question. To each man his own knowledge. You could tell me the details of the patient's appearance—nothing there would escape you. If I wanted information about the papers on that desk, Mr. Raymond would have noticed anything there was to see. To find out about the fire, I must ask the man whose business it is to observe such things. You permit—"

He moved swiftly to the fireplace and rang the bell.

After a lapse of a minute or two Parker appeared.

"The bell rang, sir," he said hesitatingly.

"Come in, Parker," said Colonel Melrose. "This gentleman wants to ask you something."

Parker transferred a respectful attention to Poirot.

"Parker," said the little man, "when you broke down the door with Dr. Sheppard last night, and found your master dead, what was the state of the fire?"

Parker replied without a pause.

"It had burned very low, sir. It was almost out."

"Ah!" said Poirot. The exclamation sounded almost triumphant. He went on:—

"Look round you, my good Parker. Is this room exactly as it was then?"

The butler's eye swept round. It came to rest on the windows.

"The curtains were drawn, sir, and the electric light was on."

Poirot nodded approval.

"Anything else?"

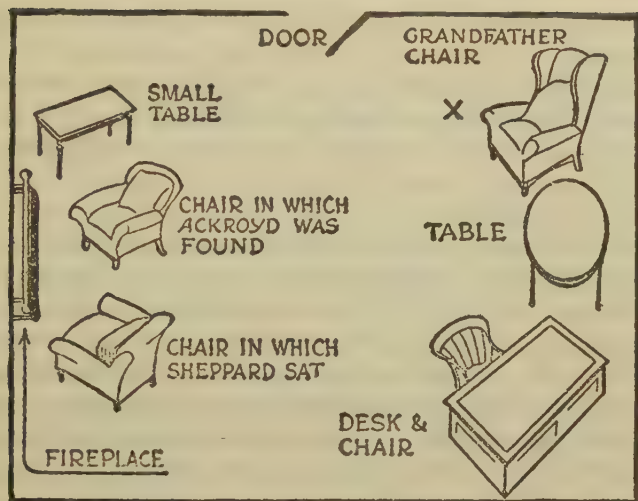
"Yes, sir, this chair was drawn out a little more."

He indicated a big grandfather chair to the left of the door between it and the window. I append a plan of the room with the chair in question marked with an X.

"Just show me," said Poirot.

The butler drew the chair in question out a good two feet from the wall, turning it so that the seat faced the door.

"*Voilà ce qui est curieux,*" murmured Poirot. "No one would want to sit



in a chair in such a position, I fancy. Now who pushed it back into place again, I wonder? Did you, my friend?"

"No, sir," said Parker. "I was too upset with seeing the master and all." Poirot looked across at me.

"Did you, doctor?"

I shook my head.

"It was back in position when I arrived with the police, sir," put in Parker. "I'm sure of that."

"Curious," said Poirot again.

"Raymond or Blunt must have pushed it back," I suggested. "Surely it isn't important?"

"It is completely unimportant," said Poirot. "That is why it is so interesting," he added softly.

"Excuse me a minute," said Colonel Melrose. He left the room with Parker.

"Do you think Parker is speaking the truth?" I asked.

"About the chair, yes. Otherwise I do not know. You will find, M. le docteur, if you have much to do with cases of this kind, that they all resemble each other in one thing."

"What is that?" I asked curiously.

"Every one concerned in them has something to hide."

"Have I?" I asked, smiling.

Poirot looked at me attentively.

"I think you have," he said quietly.

"But—"

"Have you told me everything known to you about this young man Paton?"

He smiled as I grew red. "Oh! do not fear. I will not press you. I shall learn it in good time."

"I wish you'd tell me something of your methods," I said hastily, to cover my confusion. "The point about the fire, for instance?"

"Oh! that was very simple. You leave Mr. Ackroyd at—ten minutes to nine, was it not?"

"Yes, exactly, I should say."

"The window is then closed and bolted and the door unlocked. At a quarter past ten when the body is discovered, the door is locked and the window is open. Who opened it? Clearly only Mr. Ackroyd himself could have done so, and for one of two reasons. Either because the room became unbearably hot (but since the fire was nearly out and there was a sharp drop in temperature last night, that cannot be the reason), or because he admitted some one that way. And if he admitted some one that way, it must have been some one well known to him, since he had previously shown himself uneasy on the subject of that same window."

"It sounds very simple," I said.

"Everything is simple, if you arrange the facts methodically. We are concerned now with the personality of the person who was with him at nine-thirty last night. Everything goes to show that that was the individual admitted by the window, and though Mr. Ackroyd was seen alive later by Miss Flora, we cannot approach a solution of the mystery until we know who that visitor was. The window may have been left open after his departure and so afforded entrance to the murderer, or the same person may have returned a second time. Ah! here is the colonel who returns."

Colonel Melrose entered with an animated manner.

"That telephone call has been traced at last," he said. "It did not come from here. It was put through to Dr. Sheppard at 10.15 last night from a public call office at King's Abbot station. And at 10.23 the night mail leaves for Liverpool."

CHAPTER VIII

INSPECTOR RAGLAN IS CONFIDENT

WE LOOKED at each other.

"You'll have inquiries made at the station, of course?" I said.

"Naturally, but I'm not over-sanguine as to the result. You know what that station is like."

I did. King's Abbot is a mere village, but its station happens to be a important junction. Most of the big expresses stop there, and trains are shunted, re-sorted, and made up. It has two or three public telephone boxes.

At that time of night three local trains come in close upon each other, to catch the connection with the express for the north which comes in at 10.19 and leaves at 10.23. The whole place is in a bustle, and the chances of one particular person being noticed telephoning or getting into the express are very small indeed.

"But why telephone at all?" demanded Melrose. "That is what I find so extraordinary. There seems no rhyme or reason in the thing."

Poirot carefully straightened a china ornament on one of the bookcases. "Be sure there was a reason," he said over his shoulder.

"But what reason could it be?"

"When we know that, we shall know everything. This case is very curious and very interesting."

There was something almost indescribable in the way he said those last words. I felt that he was looking at the case from some peculiar angle of his own, and what he saw I could not tell.

He went to the window and stood there, looking out.

"You say it was nine o'clock, Dr. Sheppard, when you met this stranger outside the gate?"

He asked the question without turning round.

"Yes," I replied. "I heard the church clock chime the hour."

"How long would it take him to reach the house—to reach this window, for instance?"

"Five minutes at the outside. Two or three minutes only if he took the path at the right of the drive and came straight here."

"But to do that he would have to know the way. How can I explain myself?—it would mean that he had been here before—that he knew his surroundings."

"That is true," replied Colonel Melrose.

"We could find out, doubtless, if Mr. Ackroyd had received any strangers during the past week?"

"Young Raymond could tell us that," I said.

"Or Parker," suggested Colonel Melrose.

"*Ou tous les deux*," suggested Poirot, smiling.

Colonel Melrose went in search of Raymond, and I rang the bell once more for Parker.

Colonel Melrose returned almost immediately, accompanied by the young secretary, whom he introduced to Poirot. Geoffrey Raymond was fresh and debonair as ever. He seemed surprised and delighted to make Poirot's acquaintance.

"No idea you'd been living among us incognito, M. Poirot," he said. "It will be a great privilege to watch you at work—Hallo, what's this?"

Poirot had been standing just to the left of the door. Now he moved

aside suddenly, and I saw that while my back was turned he must have swiftly drawn out the arm-chair till it stood in the position Parker had indicated.

"Want me to sit in the chair whilst you take a blood test?" asked Raymond good-humoredly. "What's the idea?"

"M. Raymond, this chair was pulled out—so—last night when Mr. Ackroyd was found killed. Some one moved it back again into place. Did you do so?"

The secretary's reply came without a second's hesitation.

"No, indeed I didn't. I don't even remember that it was in that position, but it must have been if you say so. Anyway, somebody else must have moved it back to its proper place. Have they destroyed a clew in doing so? Too bad!"

"It is of no consequence," said the detective. "Of no consequence whatever. What I really want to ask you is this, M. Raymond: Did any stranger come to see Mr. Ackroyd during this past week?"

The secretary reflected for a minute or two, knitting his brows, and during the pause Parker appeared in answer to the bell.

"No," said Raymond at last. "I can't remember any one. Can you, Parker?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Any stranger coming to see Mr. Ackroyd this week?"

The butler reflected for a minute or two.

"There was the young man who came on Wednesday, sir," he said at last. "From Curtis and Troute, I understood he was."

Raymond moved this aside with an impatient hand.

"Oh! yes, I remember, but that is not the kind of stranger this gentleman means." He turned to Poirot. "Mr. Ackroyd had some idea of purchasing a dictaphone," he explained. "It would have enabled us to get through a lot more work in a limited time. The firm in question sent down their representative, but nothing came of it. Mr. Ackroyd did not make up his mind to purchase."

Poirot turned to the butler.

"Can you describe this young man to me, my good Parker?"

"He was fair-haired, sir, and short. Very neatly dressed in a blue serge suit. A very presentable young man, sir, for his station in life."

Poirot turned to me.

"The man you met outside the gate, doctor, was tall, was he not?"

"Yes," I said. "Somewhere about six feet, I should say."

"There is nothing in that, then," declared the Belgian. "I thank you, Parker."

The butler spoke to Raymond.

"Mr. Hammond has just arrived, sir," he said. "He is anxious to know if he can be of any service, and he would be glad to have a word with you."

"I'll come at once," said the young man. He hurried out. Poirot looked inquiringly at the chief constable.

"The family solicitor, M. Poirot," said the latter.

"It is a busy time for this young M. Raymond," murmured M. Poirot. "He has the air efficient, that one."

"I believe Mr. Ackroyd considered him a most able secretary."

"He has been here—how long?"

"Just on two years, I fancy."

"His duties he fulfills punctiliously. Of that I am sure. In what manner does he amuse himself? Does he go in for *le sport*?"

"Private secretaries haven't much time for that sort of thing," said Colonel Melrose, smiling. "Raymond plays golf, I believe. And tennis in the summer time."

"He does not attend the courses—I should say the running of the horses?"

"Race meetings? No, I don't think he's interested in racing."

Poirot nodded and seemed to lose interest. He glanced slowly round the study.

"I have seen, I think, all that there is to be seen here."

I, too, looked round.

"If those walls could speak," I murmured.

Poirot shook his head.

"A tongue is not enough," he said. "They would have to have also eyes and ears. But do not be too sure that these dead things"—he touched the top of the bookcase as he spoke—"are always dumb. To me they speak sometimes—chairs, tables—they have their message!"

He turned away towards the door.

"What message?" I cried. "What have they said to you to-day?"

He looked over his shoulder and raised one eyebrow quizzically.

"An opened window," he said. "A locked door. A chair that apparently moved itself. To all three I say, 'Why?' and I find no answer."

He shook his head, puffed out his chest, and stood blinking at us. He looked ridiculously full of his own importance. It crossed my mind to wonder whether he was really any good as a detective. Had his big reputation been built up on a series of lucky chances?

I think the same thought must have occurred to Colonel Melrose, for he frowned.

"Anything more you want to see, M. Poirot?" he inquired brusquely.

"You would perhaps be so kind as to show me the silver table from which the weapon was taken? After that, I will trespass on your kindness no longer."

We went to the drawing-room, but on the way the constable waylaid the colonel, and after a muttered conversation the latter excused himself and left us together. I showed Poirot the silver table, and after raising the lid

once or twice and letting it fall, he pushed open the window and stepped out on the terrace. I followed him.

Inspector Raglan had just turned the corner of the house, and was coming towards us. His face looked grim and satisfied.

"So there you are, M. Poirot," he said. "Well, this isn't going to be much of a case. I'm sorry, too. A nice enough young fellow gone wrong."

Poirot's face fell, and he spoke very mildly.

"I'm afraid I shall not be able to be of much aid to you, then?"

"Next time, perhaps," said the inspector soothingly. "Though we don't have murders every day in this quiet little corner of the world."

Poirot's gaze took on an admiring quality.

"You have been of a marvelous promptness," he observed. "How exactly did you go to work, if I may ask?"

"Certainly," said the inspector. "To begin with—method. That's what I always say—method!"

"Ah!" cried the other. "That, too, is my watchword. Method, order, and the little gray cells."

"The cells?" said the inspector, staring.

"The little gray cells of the brain," explained the Belgian.

"Oh, of course; well, we all use them, I suppose."

"In a greater or lesser degree," murmured Poirot. "And there are, too, differences in quality. Then there is the psychology of a crime. One must study that."

"Ah!" said the inspector, "you've been bitten with all this psychoanalysis stuff? Now, I'm a plain man—"

"Mrs. Raglan would not agree, I am sure, to that," said Poirot, making him a little bow.

Inspector Raglan, a little taken aback, bowed.

"You don't understand," he said, grinning broadly. "Lord, what a lot of difference language makes. I'm telling you how I set to work. First of all, method. Mr. Ackroyd was last seen alive at a quarter to ten by his niece, Miss Flora Ackroyd. That's fact number one, isn't it?"

"If you say so."

"Well, it is. At half-past ten, the doctor here says that Mr. Ackroyd has been dead at least half an hour. You stick to that, doctor?"

"Certainly," I said. "Half an hour or longer."

"Very good. That gives us exactly a quarter of an hour in which the crime must have been committed. I make a list of every one in the house, and work through it, setting down opposite their names where they were and what they were doing between the hour of 9.45 and 10 p.m."

He handed a sheet of paper to Poirot. I read it over his shoulder. It ran as follows, written in a neat script:—

Major Blunt.—In billiard room with Mr. Raymond.

(Latter confirms.)

Mr. Raymond.—Billiard room. (See above.)

Mrs. Ackroyd.—9.45 watching billiard match. Went up to bed 9.55. (Raymond and Blunt watched her up staircase.)

Miss Ackroyd.—Went straight from her uncle's room upstairs. (Confirmed by Parker, also housemaid, Elsie Dale.)

Servants:—

Parker.—Went straight to butler's pantry. (Confirmed by housekeeper, Miss Russell, who came down to speak to him about something at 9.47, and remained at least ten minutes.)

Miss Russell.—As above. Spoke to housemaid, Elsie Dale, upstairs at 9.45.

Ursula Bourne (parlormaid).—In her own room until 9.55. Then in Servants' Hall.

Mrs. Cooper (cook).—In Servants' Hall.

Gladys Jones (second housemaid).—In Servants' Hall.

Elsie Dale.—Upstairs in bedroom. Seen there by Miss Russell and Miss Flora Ackroyd.

Mary Thripp (kitchenmaid).—Servants' Hall.

"The cook has been here seven years, the parlormaid eighteen months, and Parker just over a year. The others are new. Except for something fishy about Parker, they all seem quite all right."

"A very complete list," said Poirot, handing it back to him. "I am quite sure that Parker did not do the murder," he added gravely.

"So is my sister," I struck in. "And she's usually right." Nobody paid any attention to my interpolation.

"That disposes pretty effectually of the household," continued the inspector. "Now we come to a very grave point. The woman at the lodge—Mary Black—was pulling the curtains last night when she saw Ralph Paton turn in at the gate and go up towards the house."

"She is sure of that?" I asked sharply.

"Quite sure. She knows him well by sight. He went past very quickly and turned off by the path to the right, which is a short cut to the terrace."

"And what time was that?" asked Poirot, who had sat with an immovable face.

"Exactly twenty-five minutes past nine," said the inspector gravely.

There was a silence. Then the inspector spoke again.

"It's all clear enough. It fits in without a flaw. At twenty-five minutes past nine, Captain Paton is seen passing the lodge; at nine-thirty or thereabouts, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond hears some one in here asking for money and Mr. Ackroyd refusing. What happens next? Captain Paton leaves the same way—

through the window. He walks along the terrace, angry and baffled. He comes to the open drawing-room window. Say it's now a quarter to ten. Miss Flora Ackroyd is saying good-night to her uncle. Major Blunt, Mr. Raymond, and Mrs. Ackroyd are in the billiard room. The drawing-room is empty. He steals in, takes the dagger from the silver table, and returns to the study window. He slips off his shoes, climbs in, and—well, I don't need to go into details. Then he slips out again and goes off. Hadn't the nerve to go back to the inn. He makes for the station, rings up from there—"

"Why?" said Poirot softly.

I jumped at the interruption. The little man was leaning forward. His eyes shone with a queer green light.

For a moment Inspector Raglan was taken aback by the question.

"It's difficult to say exactly why he did that," he said at last. "But murderers do funny things. You'd know that if you were in the police force. The cleverest of them make stupid mistakes sometimes. But come along and I'll show you those footprints."

We followed him round the corner of the terrace to the study window. At a word from Raglan a police constable produced the shoes which had been obtained from the local inn.

The inspector laid them over the marks.

"They're the same," he said confidently. "That is to say, they're not the same pair that actually made these prints. He went away in those. This is a pair just like them, but older—see how the studs are worn down."

"Surely a great many people wear shoes with rubber studs in them?" asked Poirot.

"That's so, of course," said the inspector. "I shouldn't put so much stress on the footmarks if it wasn't for everything else."

"A very foolish young man, Captain Ralph Paton," said Poirot thoughtfully. "To leave so much evidence of his presence."

"Ah! well," said the inspector, "it was a dry, fine night, you know. He left no prints on the terrace or on the graveled path. But, unluckily for him, a spring must have welled up just lately at the end of the path from the drive. See here."

A small graveled path joined the terrace a few feet away. In one spot, a few yards from its termination, the ground was wet and boggy. Crossing this wet place there were again the marks of footsteps, and amongst them the shoes with rubber studs.

Poirot followed the path on a little way, the inspector by his side.

"You noticed the women's footprints?" he said suddenly.

The inspector laughed.

"Naturally. But several different women have walked this way—and men as well. It's a regular short cut to the house, you see. It would be impossible

to sort out all the footsteps. After all, it's the ones on the window-sill that are really important."

Poirot nodded.

"It's no good going farther," said the inspector, as we came in view of the drive. "It's all graveled again here, and hard as it can be."

Again Poirot nodded, but his eyes were fixed on a small garden house—a kind of superior summer-house. It was a little to the left of the path ahead of us, and a graveled walk ran up to it.

Poirot lingered about until the inspector had gone back towards the house. Then he looked at me.

"You must have indeed been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings," he said, with a twinkle. "I observe that you do not quit my side. How say you, Dr. Sheppard, shall we investigate that summer-house? It interests me."

He went up to the door and opened it. Inside, the place was almost dark. There were one or two rustic seats, a croquet set, and some folded deck-chairs.

I was startled to observe my new friend. He had dropped to his hands and knees and was crawling about the floor. Every now and then he shook his head as though not satisfied. Finally, he sat back on his heels.

"Nothing," he murmured. "Well, perhaps it was not to be expected. But it would have meant so much——"

He broke off, stiffening all over. Then he stretched out his hand to one of the rustic chairs. He detached something from one side of it.

"What is it?" I cried. "What have you found?"

He smiled, unclosing his hand so that I should see what lay in the palm of it. A scrap of stiff white cambric.

I took it from him, looked at it curiously, and then handed it back.

"What do you make of it, eh, my friend?" he asked, eyeing me keenly.

"A scrap torn from a handkerchief," I suggested, shrugging my shoulders.

He made another dart and picked up a small quill—a goose quill by the look of it.

"And that?" he cried triumphantly. "What do you make of that?"

I only stared.

He slipped the quill into his pocket, and looked again at the scrap of white stuff.

"A fragment of a handkerchief?" he mused. "Perhaps you are right. But remember this—a good laundry does not starch a handkerchief."

He nodded at me triumphantly, then he put away the scrap carefully in his pocket-book.

CHAPTER IX

THE GOLDFISH POND

WE WALKED back to the house together. There was no sign of the inspector. Poirot paused on the terrace and stood with his back to the house, slowly turning his head from side to side.

"*Une belle propriété*," he said at last appreciatively. "Who inherits it?"

His words gave me almost a shock. It is an odd thing, but until that moment the question of inheritance had never come into my head. Poirot watched me keenly.

"It is a new idea to you, that," he said at last. "You had not thought of it before—eh?"

"No," I said truthfully. "I wish I had."

He looked at me again curiously.

"I wonder just what you mean by that," he said thoughtfully. "Ah! no," as I was about to speak. "*Inutile!* You would not tell me your real thought."

"Every one has something to hide," I quoted, smiling.

"Exactly."

"You still believe that?"

"More than ever, my friend. But it is not easy to hide things from Hercule Poirot. He has a knack of finding out."

He descended the steps of the Dutch garden as he spoke.

"Let us walk a little," he said over his shoulder. "The air is pleasant to-day."

I followed him. He led me down a path to the left enclosed in yew hedges. A walk led down the middle, bordered on each side with formal flower beds, and at the end was a round paved recess with a seat and a pond of goldfish. Instead of pursuing the path to the end, Poirot took another which wound up the side of a wooded slope. In one spot the trees had been cleared away, and a seat had been put. Sitting there one had a splendid view over the countryside, and one looked right down on the paved recess and the goldfish pond.

"England is very beautiful," said Poirot, his eyes straying over the prospect. Then he smiled. "And so are English girls," he said in a lower tone. "Hush, my friend, and look at the pretty picture below us."

It was then that I saw Flora. She was moving along the path we had just left and she was humming a little snatch of song. Her step was more dancing than walking, and in spite of her black dress, there was nothing but joy in her whole attitude. She gave a sudden pirouette on her toes, and her black draperies swung out. At the same time she flung her head back and laughed outright.

As she did so a man stepped out from the trees. It was Hector Blunt.

The girl started. Her expression changed a little.

"How you startled me—I didn't see you."

Blunt said nothing, but stood looking at her for a minute or two in silence.

"What I like about you," said Flora, with a touch of malice, "is your cheery conversation."

I fancy that at that Blunt reddened under his tan. His voice, when he spoke, sounded different—it had a curious sort of humility in it.

"Never was much of a fellow for talking. Not even when I was young."

"That was a very long time ago, I suppose," said Flora gravely.

I caught the undercurrent of laughter in her voice, but I don't think Blunt did.

"Yes," he said simply, "it was."

"How does it feel to be Methuselah?" asked Flora.

This time the laughter was more apparent, but Blunt was following out an idea of his own.

"Remember the Johnny who sold his soul to the devil? In return for being made young again? There's an opera about it."

"Faust, you mean?"

"That's the beggar. Rum story. Some of us would do it if we could."

"Any one would think you were creaking at the joints to hear you talk," cried Flora, half vexed, half amused.

Blunt said nothing for a minute or two. Then he looked away from Flora into the middle distance and observed to an adjacent tree trunk that it was about time he got back to Africa.

"Are you going on another expedition—shooting things?"

"Expect so. Usually do, you know—shoot things, I mean."

"You shot that head in the hall, didn't you?"

Blunt nodded. Then he jerked out, going rather red, as he did so:—

"Care for some decent skins any time? If so, I could get 'em for you."

"Oh! please do," cried Flora. "Will you really? You won't forget?"

"I shan't forget," said Hector Blunt.

He added, in a sudden burst of communicativeness:—

"Time I went. I'm no good in this sort of life. Haven't got the manners for it. I'm a rough fellow, no use in society. Never remember the things one's expected to say. Yes, time I went."

"But you're not going at once," cried Flora. "Not—not while we're in all this trouble. Oh! please. If you go——"

She turned away a little.

"You want me to stay?" asked Blunt.

He spoke deliberately but quite simply.

"We all——"

"I meant you personally," said Blunt, with directness.

Flora turned slowly back again and met his eyes.

"I want you to stay," she said, "if—if that makes any difference."

"It makes all the difference," said Blunt.

There was a moment's silence. They sat down on the stone seat by the goldfish pond. It seemed as though neither of them knew quite what to say next.

"It—it's such a lovely morning," said Flora at last. "You know, I can't help feeling happy, in spite—in spite of everything. That's awful, I suppose?"

"Quite natural," said Blunt. "Never saw your uncle until two years ago, did you? Can't be expected to grieve very much. Much better to have no humbug about it."

"There's something awfully consoling about you," said Flora. "You make things so simple."

"Things are simple as a rule," said the big game hunter.

"Not always," said Flora.

Her voice had lowered itself, and I saw Blunt turn and look at her, bringing his eyes back from (apparently) the coast of Africa to do so. He evidently put his own construction on her change of tone, for he said, after a minute or two, in rather an abrupt manner:—

"I say, you know, you mustn't worry. About that young chap, I mean. Inspector's an ass. Everybody knows—utterly absurd to think he could have done it. Man from outside. Burglar chap. That's the only possible solution."

Flora turned to look at him.

"You really think so?"

"Don't you?" said Blunt quickly.

"I—oh, yes, of course."

Another silence, and then Flora burst out:—

"I'm—I'll tell you why I felt so happy this morning. However heartless you think me, I'd rather tell you. It's because the lawyer has been—Mr. Hammond. He told us about the will. Uncle Roger has left me twenty thousand pounds. Think of it—twenty thousand beautiful pounds."

Blunt looked surprised.

"Does it mean so much to you?"

"Mean much to me? Why, it's everything. Freedom—life—no more scheming and scraping and lying—"

"Lying?" said Blunt, sharply interrupting.

Flora seemed taken aback for a minute.

"You know what I mean," she said uncertainly. "Pretending to be thankful for all the nasty castoff things rich relations give you. Last year's coats and skirts and hats."

"Don't know much about ladies' clothes; should have said you were always very well turned out."

"It's cost me something, though," said Flora in a low voice. "Don't let's talk of horrid things. I'm so happy I'm free. Free to do what I like. Free not to—"

She stopped suddenly.

"Not to what?" asked Blunt quickly.

"I forget now. Nothing important."

Blunt had a stick in his hand, and he thrust it into the pond, poking at something.

"What are you doing, Major Blunt?"

"There's something bright down there. Wondered what it was—looks like a gold brooch. Now I've stirred up the mud and it's gone."

"Perhaps it's a crown," suggested Flora. "Like the one *Mélisande* saw in the water."

"*Mélisande*," said Blunt reflectively—"she's in an opera, isn't she?"

"Yes, you seem to know a lot about operas."

"People take me sometimes," said Blunt sadly. "Funny idea of pleasure—worse racket than the natives make with their tom-toms."

Flora laughed.

"I remember *Mélisande*," continued Blunt, "married an old chap old enough to be her father."

He threw a small piece of flint into the goldfish pond. Then, with a change of manner, he turned to Flora.

"Miss Ackroyd, can I do anything? About Paton, I mean. I know how dreadfully anxious you must be."

"Thank you," said Flora in a cold voice. "There is really nothing to be done. Ralph will be all right. I've got hold of the most wonderful detective in the world, and he's going to find out all about it."

For some time I had felt uneasy as to our position. We were not exactly eavesdropping, since the two in the garden below had only to lift their heads to see us. Nevertheless, I should have drawn attention to our presence before now, had not my companion put a warning pressure on my arm. Clearly he wished me to remain silent.

But now he rose briskly to his feet, clearing his throat.

"I demand pardon," he cried. "I cannot allow mademoiselle thus extravagantly to compliment me, and not draw attention to my presence. They say the listener hears no good of himself, but that is not the case this time. To spare my blushes, I must join you and apologize."

He hurried down the path with me close behind him, and joined the others by the pond.

"This is M. Hercule Poirot," said Flora. "I expect you've heard of him." Poirot bowed.

"I know Major Blunt by reputation," he said politely. "I am glad to have

encountered you, monsieur. I am in need of some information that you can give me."

Blunt looked at him inquiringly.

"When did you last see M. Ackroyd alive?"

"At dinner."

"And you neither saw nor heard anything of him after that?"

"Didn't see him. Heard his voice."

"How was that?"

"I strolled out on the terrace——"

"Pardon me, what time was this?"

"About half-past nine. I was walking up and down smoking in front of the drawing-room window. I heard Ackroyd talking in his study——"

Poirot stooped and removed a microscopic weed.

"Surely you couldn't hear voices in the study from that part of the terrace," he murmured.

He was not looking at Blunt, but I was, and to my intense surprise, I saw the latter flush.

"Went as far as the corner," he explained unwillingly.

"Ah! indeed?" said Poirot.

In the mildest manner he conveyed an impression that more was wanted.

"Thought I saw—a woman disappearing into the bushes. Just a gleam of white, you know. Must have been mistaken. It was while I was standing at the corner of the terrace that I heard Ackroyd's voice speaking to that secretary of his."

"Speaking to Mr. Geoffrey Raymond?"

"Yes—that's what I supposed at the time. Seems I was wrong."

"Mr. Ackroyd didn't address him by name?"

"Oh, no."

"Then, if I may ask, why did you think——?"

Blunt explained laboriously.

"Took it for granted that it *would* be Raymond, because he had said just before I came out that he was taking some papers to Ackroyd. Never thought of it being anybody else."

"Can you remember what the words you heard were?"

"Afraid I can't. Something quite ordinary and unimportant. Only caught a scrap of it. I was thinking of something else at the time."

"It is of no importance," murmured Poirot. "Did you move a chair back against the wall when you went into the study after the body was discovered?"

"Chair? No—why should I?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders but did not answer. He turned to Flora.

"There is one thing I should like to know from you, mademoiselle. When

you were examining the things in the silver table with Dr. Sheppard, was the dagger in its place, or was it not?"

Flora's chin shot up.

"Inspector Raglan has been asking me that?" she said resentfully. "I've told him, and I'll tell you. I'm perfectly certain the dagger was *not* there. He thinks it was and that Ralph sneaked it later in the evening. And—and he doesn't believe me. He thinks I'm saying it to—to shield Ralph."

"And aren't you?" I asked gravely.

Flora stamped her foot.

"You, too, Dr. Sheppard! Oh! it's too bad."

Poirot tactfully made a diversion.

"It is true what I heard you say, Major Blunt. There is something that glitters in this pond. Let us see if I can reach it."

He knelt down by the pond, baring his arm to the elbow, and lowered it in very slowly, so as not to disturb the bottom of the pond. But in spite of all his precautions the mud eddied and swirled, and he was forced to draw his arm out again empty-handed.

He gazed ruefully at the mud upon his arm. I offered him my handkerchief, which he accepted with fervent protestations of thanks. Blunt looked at his watch.

"Nearly lunch time," he said. "We'd better be getting back to the house."

"You will lunch with us, M. Poirot?" asked Flora. "I should like you to meet my mother. She is—very fond of Ralph."

The little man bowed.

"I shall be delighted, mademoiselle."

"And you will stay, too, won't you, Dr. Sheppard?"

I hesitated.

"Oh, do!"

I wanted to, so I accepted the invitation without further ceremony.

We set out towards the house, Flora and Blunt walking ahead.

"What hair," said Poirot to me in a low tone, nodding towards Flora. "The real gold! They will make a pretty couple. She and the dark, handsome Captain Paton. Will they not?"

I looked at him inquiringly, but he began to fuss about a few microscopic drops of water on his coat sleeve. The man reminded me in some ways of a cat. His green eyes and his finicking habits.

"And all for nothing, too," I said sympathetically. "I wonder what it was in the pond?"

"Would you like to see?" asked Poirot.

I stared at him. He nodded.

"My good friend," he said gently and reproachfully, "Hercule Poirot does not run the risk of disarranging his costume without being sure of attaining

his object. To do so would be ridiculous and absurd. I am never ridiculous."

"But you brought your hand out empty," I objected.

"There are times when it is necessary to have discretion. Do you tell your patients everything—everything, doctor? I think not. Nor do you tell your excellent sister everything either, is it not so? Before showing my empty hand, I dropped what it contained into my other hand. You shall see what that was."

He held out his left hand, palm open. On it lay a little circlet of gold. A woman's wedding ring.

I took it from him.

"Look inside," commanded Poirot.

I did so. Inside was an inscription in fine writing:—

From R., March 13th.

I looked at Poirot, but he was busy inspecting his appearance in a tiny pocket glass. He paid particular attention to his mustaches, and none at all to me. I saw that he did not intend to be communicative.

CHAPTER X

THE PARLORMAID

WE FOUND Mrs. Ackroyd in the hall. With her was a small dried-up little man, with an aggressive chin and sharp gray eyes, and "lawyer" written all over him.

"Mr. Hammond is staying to lunch with us," said Mrs. Ackroyd. "You know Major Blunt, Mr. Hammond? And dear Dr. Sheppard—also a close friend of poor Roger's. And, let me see—"

She paused, surveying Hercule Poirot in some perplexity.

"This is M. Poirot, mother," said Flora. "I told you about him this morning."

"Oh! yes," said Mrs. Ackroyd vaguely. "Of course, my dear, of course. He is to find Ralph, is he not?"

"He is to find out who killed uncle," said Flora.

"Oh! my dear," cried her mother. "Please! My poor nerves. I am a wreck this morning, a positive wreck. Such a dreadful thing to happen. I can't help feeling that it must have been an accident of some kind. Roger was so fond of handling queer curios. His hand must have slipped, or something."

This theory was received in polite silence. I saw Poirot edge up to the lawyer, and speak to him in a confidential undertone. They moved aside into the embrasure of the window. I joined them—then hesitated.

"Perhaps I'm intruding," I said.

"Not at all," cried Poirot heartily. "You and I, M. le docteur, we investigate this affair side by side. Without you I should be lost. I desire a little information from the good Mr. Hammond."

"You are acting on behalf of Captain Ralph Paton, I understand," said the lawyer cautiously.

Poirot shook his head.

"Not so. I am acting in the interests of justice. Miss Ackroyd has asked me to investigate the death of her uncle."

Mr. Hammond seemed slightly taken aback.

"I cannot seriously believe that Captain Paton can be concerned in this crime," he said, "however strong the circumstantial evidence against him may be. The mere fact that he was hard pressed for money——"

"Was he hard pressed for money?" interpolated Poirot quickly.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"It was a chronic condition with Ralph Paton," he said dryly. "Money went through his hands like water. He was always applying to his stepfather."

"Had he done so of late? During the last year, for instance?"

"I cannot say. Mr. Ackroyd did not mention the fact to me."

"I comprehend. Mr. Hammond, I take it that you are acquainted with the provisions of Mr. Ackroyd's will?"

"Certainly. That is my principal business here to-day."

"Then, seeing that I am acting for Miss Ackroyd, you will not object to telling me the terms of that will?"

"They are quite simple. Shorn of legal phraseology, and after paying certain legacies and bequests——"

"Such as——?" interrupted Poirot.

Mr. Hammond seemed a little surprised.

"A thousand pounds to his housekeeper, Miss Russell; fifty pounds to the cook, Emma Cooper; five hundred pounds to his secretary, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond. Then to various hospitals——"

Poirot held up his hand.

"Ah! the charitable bequests, they interest me not."

"Quite so. The income on ten thousand pounds' worth of shares to be paid to Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd during her lifetime. Miss Flora Ackroyd inherits twenty thousand pounds outright. The residue—including this property, and the shares in Ackroyd and Son—to his adopted son, Ralph Paton."

"Mr. Ackroyd possessed a large fortune?"

"A very large fortune. Captain Paton will be an exceedingly wealthy young man."

There was a silence. Poirot and the lawyer looked at each other.

"Mr. Hammond," came Mrs. Ackroyd's voice plaintively from the fireplace.

The lawyer answered the summons. Poirot took my arm and drew me right into the window.

"Regard the irises," he remarked in rather a loud voice. "Magnificent, are they not? A straight and pleasing effect."

At the same time I felt the pressure of his hand on my arm, and he added in a low tone:—

"Do you really wish to aid me? To take part in this investigation?"

"Yes, indeed," I said eagerly. "There's nothing I should like better. You don't know what a dull old fogey's life I lead. Never anything out of the ordinary."

"Good, we will be colleagues then. In a minute or two I fancy Major Blunt will join us. He is not happy with the good mamma. Now there are some things I want to know—but I do not wish to seem to want to know them. You comprehend? So it will be your part to ask the questions."

"What questions do you want me to ask?" I asked apprehensively.

"I want you to introduce the name of Mrs. Ferrars."

"Yes?"

"Speak of her in a natural fashion. Ask him if he was down here when her husband died. You understand the kind of thing I mean. And while he replies, watch his face without seeming to watch it. *C'est compris?*"

There was no time for more, for at that minute, as Poirot had prophesied, Blunt left the others in his abrupt fashion and came over to us.

I suggested strolling on the terrace, and he acquiesced. Poirot stayed behind.

I stopped to examine a late rose.

"How things change in the course of a day or so," I observed. "I was up here last Wednesday, I remember, walking up and down this same terrace. Ackroyd was with me—full of spirits. And now—three days later—Ackroyd's dead, poor fellow, Mrs. Ferrars's dead—you knew her, didn't you? But of course you did."

Blunt nodded his head.

"Had you seen her since you'd been down this time?"

"Went with Ackroyd to call. Last Tuesday, think it was. Fascinating woman—but something queer about her. Deep—one would never know what she was up to."

I looked into his steady gray eyes. Nothing there surely. I went on:—

"I suppose you'd met her before."

"Last time I was here—she and her husband had just come here to live." He paused a minute and then added: "Rum thing, she had changed a lot between then and now."

"How—changed?" I asked.

"Looked ten years older."

"Were you down here when her husband died?" I asked, trying to make the question sound as casual as possible.

"No. From all I heard it would be a good riddance. Uncharitable, perhaps, but the truth."

I agreed.

"Ashley Ferrars was by no means a pattern husband," I said cautiously.

"Blackguard, I thought," said Blunt.

"No," I said, "only a man with more money than was good for him."

"Oh! money! All the troubles in the world can be put down to money—or the lack of it."

"Which has been your particular trouble?" I asked.

"I've enough for what I want. I'm one of the lucky ones."

"Indeed."

"I'm not too flush just now, as a matter of fact. Came into a legacy a year ago, and like a fool let myself be persuaded into putting it into some wild-cat scheme."

I sympathized, and narrated my own similar trouble.

Then the gong pealed out, and we all went in to lunch. Poirot drew me back a little.

"*Eh! bien?*"

"He's all right," I said. "I'm sure of it."

"Nothing—disturbing?"

"He had a legacy just a year ago," I said. "But why not? Why shouldn't he? I'll swear the man is perfectly square and aboveboard."

"Without doubt, without doubt," said Poirot soothingly. "Do not upset yourself."

He spoke as though to a fractious child.

We all trooped into the dining-room. It seemed incredible that less than twenty-four hours had passed since I last sat at that table.

Afterwards, Mrs. Ackroyd took me aside and sat down with me on a sofa.

"I can't help feeling a little hurt," she murmured, producing a handkerchief of the kind obviously not meant to be cried into. "Hurt, I mean, by Roger's lack of confidence in me. That twenty thousand pounds ought to have been left to *me*—not to Flora. A mother could be trusted to safeguard the interests of her child. A lack of trust, I call it."

"You forget, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said, "Flora was Ackroyd's own niece, a blood relation. It would have been different had you been his sister instead of his sister-in-law."

"As poor Cecil's widow, I think my feelings ought to have been considered," said the lady, touching her eyelashes gingerly with the handkerchief. "But Roger was always most peculiar—not to say *mean*—about money matters. It has been a most difficult position for both Flora and myself. He did

not even give the poor child an allowance. He would pay her bills, you know, and even that with a good deal of reluctance and asking what she wanted all those fal-lals for—so like a man—but—now I've forgotten what it was I was going to say! Oh, yes, not a penny we could call our own, you know. Flora resented it—yes, I must say she resented it—very strongly. Though devoted to her uncle, of course. But any girl would have resented it. Yes, I must say Roger had very strange ideas about money. He wouldn't even buy new face towels, though I told him the old ones were in holes. And then," proceeded Mrs. Ackroyd, with a sudden leap highly characteristic of her conversation, "to leave all that money—a thousand pounds—fancy, a thousand pounds!—to that woman."

"What woman?"

"That Russell woman. Something very queer about her, and so I've always said. But Roger wouldn't hear a word against her. Said she was a woman of great force of character, and that he admired and respected her. He was always going on about her rectitude and independence and moral worth. I think there's something fishy about her. She was certainly doing her best to marry Roger. But I soon put a stop to that. She's always hated me. Naturally. I saw through her."

I began to wonder if there was any chance of stemming Mrs. Ackroyd's eloquence, and getting away.

Mr. Hammond provided the necessary diversion by coming up to say good-by. I seized my chance and rose also.

"About the inquest," I said. "Where would you prefer it to be held. Here, or at the Three Boars?"

Mrs. Ackroyd stared at me with a dropped jaw.

"The inquest?" she asked, the picture of consternation. "But surely there won't have to be an inquest?"

Mr. Hammond gave a dry little cough and murmured, "Inevitable. Under the circumstances," in two short little barks.

"But surely Dr. Sheppard can arrange——"

"There are limits to my powers of arrangement," I said dryly.

"If his death was an accident——"

"He was murdered, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said brutally.

She gave a little cry.

"No theory of accident will hold water for a minute."

Mrs. Ackroyd looked at me in distress. I had no patience with what I thought was her silly fear of unpleasantness.

"If there's an inquest, I—I shan't have to answer questions and all that, shall I?" she asked.

"I don't know what will be necessary," I answered. "I imagine Mr. Ray-

mond will take the brunt of it off you. He knows all the circumstances, and can give formal evidence of identification."

The lawyer assented with a little bow.

"I really don't think there is anything to dread, Mrs. Ackroyd," he said. "You will be spared all unpleasantness. Now, as to the question of money, have you all you need for the present? I mean," he added, as she looked at him inquiringly, "ready money. Cash, you know. If not, I can arrange to let you have whatever you require."

"That ought to be all right," said Raymond, who was standing by. "Mr. Ackroyd cashed a cheque for a hundred pounds yesterday."

"A hundred pounds?"

"Yes. For wages and other expenses due to-day. At the moment it is still intact."

"Where is this money? In his desk?"

"No, he always kept his cash in his bedroom. In an old collar-box, to be accurate. Funny idea, wasn't it?"

"I think," said the lawyer, "we ought to make sure the money is there before I leave."

"Certainly," agreed the secretary. "I'll take you up now. . . . Oh! I forgot. The door's locked."

Inquiry from Parker elicited the information that Inspector Raglan was in the housekeeper's room asking a few supplementary questions. A few minutes later the inspector joined the party in the hall, bringing the key with him. He unlocked the door and we passed into the lobby and up the small staircase. At the top of the stairs the door into Ackroyd's bedroom stood open. Inside the room it was dark, the curtains were drawn, and the bed was turned down just as it had been last night. The inspector drew the curtains, letting in the sunlight, and Geoffrey Raymond went to the top drawer of a rosewood bureau.

"He kept his money like that, in an unlocked drawer. Just fancy," commented the inspector.

The secretary flushed a little.

"Mr. Ackroyd had perfect faith in the honesty of all the servants," he said hotly.

"Oh! quite so," said the inspector hastily.

Raymond opened the drawer, took out a round leather collar-box from the back of it, and opening it, drew out a thick wallet.

"Here is the money," he said, taking out a fat roll of notes. "You will find the hundred intact, I know, for Mr. Ackroyd put it in the collar-box in my presence last night when he was dressing for dinner, and of course it has not been touched since."

Mr. Hammond took the roll from him and counted it. He looked up sharply.

"A hundred pounds, you said. But there is only sixty here."

Raymond stared at him.

"Impossible," he cried, springing forward. Taking the notes from the other's hand, he counted them aloud.

Mr. Hammond had been right. The total amounted to sixty pounds.

"But—I can't understand it," cried the secretary, bewildered.

Poirot asked a question.

"You saw Mr. Ackroyd put this money away last night when he was dressing for dinner? You are sure he had not paid away any of it already?"

"I'm sure he hadn't. He even said, 'I don't want to take a hundred pounds down to dinner with me. Too bulky.'"

"Then the affair is very simple," remarked Poirot. "Either he paid out that forty pounds sometime last evening, or else it has been stolen."

"That's the matter in a nutshell," agreed the inspector. He turned to Mrs. Ackroyd. "Which of the servants would come in here yesterday evening?"

"I suppose the housemaid would turn down the bed."

"Who is she? What do you know about her?"

"She's not been here very long," said Mrs. Ackroyd. "But she's a nice ordinary country girl."

"I think we ought to clear this matter up," said the inspector. "If Mr. Ackroyd paid that money away himself, it may have a bearing on the mystery of the crime. The other servants all right, as far as you know?"

"Oh, I think so."

"Not missed anything before?"

"No."

"None of them leaving, or anything like that?"

"The parlormaid is leaving."

"When?"

"She gave notice yesterday, I believe."

"To you?"

"Oh, no. I have nothing to do with the servants. Miss Russell attends to the household matters."

The inspector remained lost in thought for a minute or two. Then he nodded his head and remarked, "I think I'd better have a word with Miss Russell, and I'll see the girl Dale as well."

Poirot and I accompanied him to the housekeeper's room. Miss Russell received us with her usual sang-froid.

Elsie Dale had been at Fernly five months. A nice girl, quick at her duties, and most respectable. Good references. The last girl in the world to take anything not belonging to her.

What about the parlormaid?

"She, too, was a most superior girl. Very quiet and ladylike. An excellent worker."

"Then why is she leaving?" asked the inspector.

Miss Russell pursed up her lips.

"It was none of my doing. I understand Mr. Ackroyd found fault with her yesterday afternoon. It was her duty to do the study, and she disarranged some of the papers on his desk, I believe. He was very annoyed about it, and she gave notice. At least, that is what I understood from her, but perhaps you'd like to see her yourselves?"

The inspector assented. I had already noticed the girl when she was waiting on us at lunch. A tall girl, with a lot of brown hair rolled tightly away at the back of her neck, and very steady gray eyes. She came in answer to the housekeeper's summons, and stood very straight with those same gray eyes fixed on us.

"You are Ursula Bourne?" asked the inspector.

"Yes, sir."

"I understand you are leaving?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why is that?"

"I disarranged some papers on Mr. Ackroyd's desk. He was very angry about it, and I said I had better leave. He told me to go as soon as possible."

"Were you in Mr. Ackroyd's bedroom at all last night? Tidying up or anything?"

"No, sir. That is Elsie's work. I never went near that part of the house."

"I must tell you, my girl, that a large sum of money is missing from Mr. Ackroyd's room."

At last I saw her roused. A wave of color swept over her face.

"I know nothing about any money. If you think I took it, and that that is why Mr. Ackroyd dismissed me, you are wrong."

"I'm not accusing you of taking it, my girl," said the inspector. "Don't flare up so."

The girl looked at him coldly.

"You can search my things if you like," she said disdainfully. "But you won't find anything."

Poirot suddenly interposed.

"It was yesterday afternoon that Mr. Ackroyd dismissed you—or you dismissed yourself, was it not?" he asked.

The girl nodded.

"How long did the interview last?"

"The interview?"

"Yes, the interview between you and Mr. Ackroyd in the study?"

"I—I don't know."

"Twenty minutes? Half an hour?"

"Something like that."

"Not longer?"

"Not longer than half an hour, certainly."

"Thank you, mademoiselle."

I looked curiously at him. He was rearranging a few objects on the table, setting them straight with precise fingers. His eyes were shining.

"That'll do," said the inspector.

Ursula Bourne disappeared. The inspector turned to Miss Russell.

"How long has she been here? Have you got a copy of the reference you had with her?"

Without answering the first question, Miss Russell moved to an adjacent bureau, opened one of the drawers, and took out a handful of letters clipped together with a patent fastener. She selected one and handed it to the inspector.

"H'm," said he. "Reads all right. Mrs. Richard Folliott, Marby Grange, Marby. Who's this woman?"

"Quite good county people," said Miss Russell.

"Well," said the inspector, handing it back, "let's have a look at the other one, Elsie Dale."

Elsie Dale was a big fair girl, with a pleasant but slightly stupid face. She answered our questions readily enough, and showed much distress and concern at the loss of the money.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with her," observed the inspector, after he had dismissed her.

"What about Parker?"

Miss Russell pursed her lips together and made no reply.

"I've a feeling there's something wrong about that man," the inspector continued thoughtfully. "The trouble is that I don't quite see when he got his opportunity. He'd be busy with his duties immediately after dinner, and he's got a pretty good alibi all through the evening. I know, for I've been devoting particular attention to it. Well, thank you very much, Miss Russell. We'll leave things as they are for the present. It's highly probable Mr. Ackroyd paid that money away himself."

The housekeeper bade us a dry good-afternoon, and we took our leave. I left the house with Poirot.

"I wonder," I said, breaking the silence, "what the papers the girl disarranged could have been for Ackroyd to have got into such a state about them? I wonder if there is any clew there to the mystery?"

"The secretary said there were no papers of particular importance on the desk," said Poirot quietly.

"Yes, but—" I paused.

"It strikes you as odd that Ackroyd should have flown into a rage about so trivial a matter?"

"Yes, it does rather."

"But was it a trivial matter?"

"Of course," I admitted, "we don't know what those papers may have been. But Raymond certainly said—"

"Leave M. Raymond out of it for a minute. What did you think of that girl?"

"Which girl? The parlormaid?"

"Yes, the parlormaid. Ursula Bourne."

"She seemed a nice girl," I said hesitatingly.

Poirot repeated my words, but whereas I had laid a slight stress on the fourth word, he put it on the second.

"She *seemed* a nice girl—yes."

Then, after a minute's silence, he took something from his pocket and handed it to me.

"See, my friend, I will show you something. Look there."

The paper he had handed me was that compiled by the inspector and given by him to Poirot that morning. Following the pointing finger, I saw a small cross marked in pencil opposite the name Ursula Bourne.

"You may not have noticed it at the time, my good friend, but there was one person on this list whose alibi had no kind of confirmation. Ursula Bourne."

"You don't think—"

"Dr. Sheppard, I dare to think anything. Ursula Bourne may have killed Mr. Ackroyd, but I confess I can see no motive for her doing so. Can you?"

He looked at me very hard—so hard that I felt uncomfortable.

"Can you?" he repeated.

"No motive whatsoever," I said firmly.

His gaze relaxed. He frowned and murmured to himself:—

"Since the blackmailer was a man, it follows that she cannot be the blackmailer, then—"

I coughed.

"As far as that goes—" I began doubtfully.

He spun round on me.

"What? What are you going to say?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Only that, strictly speaking, Mrs. Ferrars in her letter mentioned a *person*—she didn't actually specify a man. But we took it for granted, Ackroyd and I, that it *was* a man."

Poirot did not seem to be listening to me. He was muttering to himself again.

"But then it is possible after all—yes, certainly it is possible—but then—ah! I must rearrange my ideas. Method, order; never have I needed them more. Everything must fit in—in its appointed place—otherwise I am on the wrong tack."

He broke off, and whirled round upon me again.

"Where is Marby?"

"It's on the other side of Cranchester."

"How far away?"

"Oh!—fourteen miles, perhaps."

"Would it be possible for you to go there? To-morrow, say?"

"To-morrow? Let me see, that's Sunday. Yes, I could arrange it. What do you want me to do there?"

"See this Mrs. Folliott. Find out all you can about Ursula Bourne."

"Very well. But—I don't much care for the job."

"It is not the time to make difficulties. A man's life may hang on this."

"Poor Ralph," I said with a sigh. "You believe him to be innocent, though?"

Poirot looked at me very gravely.

"Do you want to know the truth?"

"Of course."

"Then you shall have it. My friend, everything points to the assumption that he is guilty."

"What!" I exclaimed.

Poirot nodded.

"Yes, that stupid inspector—for he is stupid—has everything pointing his way. I seek for the truth—and the truth leads me every time to Ralph Paton. Motive, opportunity, means. But I will leave no stone unturned. I promised Mademoiselle Flora. And she was very sure, that little one. But very sure indeed."

CHAPTER XI

POIROT PAYS A CALL

I WAS slightly nervous when I rang the bell at Marby Grange the following afternoon. I wondered very much what Poirot expected to find out. He had entrusted the job to me. Why? Was it because, as in the case of questioning Major Blunt, he wished to remain in the background? The wish, intelligible in the first case, seemed to me quite meaningless here.

My meditations were interrupted by the advent of a smart parlormaid.

Yes, Mrs. Folliott was at home. I was ushered into a big drawing-room, and looked round me curiously as I waited for the mistress of the house. A

large bare room, some good bits of old china, and some beautiful etchings, shabby covers and curtains. A lady's room in every sense of the term.

I turned from the inspection of a Bartolozzi on the wall as Mrs. Folliott came into the room. She was a tall woman, with untidy brown hair, and a very winning smile.

"Dr. Sheppard," she said hesitatingly.

"That is my name," I replied. "I must apologize for calling upon you like this, but I wanted some information about a parlormaid previously employed by you, Ursula Bourne."

With the utterance of the name the smile vanished from her face, and all the cordiality froze out of her manner. She looked uncomfortable and ill at ease.

"Ursula Bourne?" she said hesitatingly.

"Yes," I said. "Perhaps you don't remember the name?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I—I remember perfectly."

"She left you just over a year ago, I understand?"

"Yes. Yes, she did. That is quite right."

"And you were satisfied with her whilst she was with you? How long was she with you, by the way?"

"Oh! a year or two—I can't remember exactly how long. She—she is very capable. I'm sure you will find her quite satisfactory. I didn't know she was leaving Fernly. I hadn't the least idea of it."

"Can you tell me anything about her?" I asked.

"Anything about her?"

"Yes, where she comes from, who her people are—that sort of thing?"

Mrs. Folliott's face wore more than ever its frozen look.

"I don't know at all."

"Who was she with before she came to you?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember."

There was a spark of anger now underlying her nervousness. She flung up her head in a gesture that was vaguely familiar.

"Is it really necessary to ask all these questions?"

"Not at all," I said, with an air of surprise and a tinge of apology in my manner. "I had no idea you would mind answering them. I am very sorry."

Her anger left her and she became confused again.

"Oh! I don't mind answering them. I assure you I don't. Why should I? It—it just seemed a little odd, you know. That's all. A little odd."

One advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you. I should have known from Mrs. Folliott's manner, if from nothing else, that she did mind answering my questions—minded intensely. She was thoroughly uncomfortable and upset, and there was plainly some mystery in the background. I judged her to be a woman

quite unused to deception of any kind, and consequently rendered acutely uneasy when forced to practice it. A child could have seen through her.

But it was also clear that she had no intention of telling me anything further. Whatever the mystery centering around Ursula Bourne might be, I was not going to learn it through Mrs. Folliott.

Defeated, I apologized once more for disturbing her, took my hat and departed.

I went to see a couple of patients and arrived home about six o'clock. Caroline was sitting beside the wreck of tea things. She had that look of suppressed exultation on her face which I know only too well. It is a sure sign with her, of either the getting or the giving of information. I wondered which it had been.

"I've had a very interesting afternoon," began Caroline as I dropped into my own particular easy chair, and stretched out my feet to the inviting blaze in the fireplace.

"Have you?" I asked. "Miss Ganett drop in to tea?"

Miss Ganett is one of the chief of our newsmongers.

"Guess again," said Caroline with intense complacency.

I guessed several times, working slowly through all the members of Caroline's Intelligence Corps. My sister received each guess with a triumphant shake of the head. In the end she volunteered the information herself.

"M. Poirot!" she said. "Now what do you think of that?"

I thought a good many things of it, but I was careful not to say them to Caroline.

"Why did he come?" I asked.

"To see me, of course. He said that knowing my brother so well, he hoped he might be permitted to make the acquaintance of his charming sister—your charming sister, I've got mixed up, but you know what I mean."

"What did he talk about?" I asked.

"He told me a lot about himself and his cases. You know that Prince Paul of Mauretania—the one who's just married a dancer?"

"Yes?"

"I saw a most intriguing paragraph about her in *Society Snippets* the other day, hinting that she was really a Russian Grand Duchess—one of the Czar's daughters who managed to escape from the Bolsheviks. Well, it seems that M. Poirot solved a baffling murder mystery that threatened to involve them both. Prince Paul was beside himself with gratitude."

"Did he give him an emerald tie pin the size of a plover's egg?" I inquired sarcastically.

"He didn't mention it. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. "I thought it was always done. It is in detective fiction

anyway. The super detective always has his rooms littered with rubies and pearls and emeralds from grateful Royal clients."

"It's very interesting to hear about these things from the inside," said my sister complacently.

It would be—to Caroline. I could not but admire the ingenuity of M. Hercule Poirot, who had selected unerringly the case of all others that would most appeal to an elderly maiden lady living in a small village.

"Did he tell you if the dancer was really a Grand Duchess?" I inquired.

"He was not at liberty to speak," said Caroline importantly.

I wondered how far Poirot had strained the truth in talking to Caroline—probably not at all. He had conveyed his innuendoes by means of his eyebrows and his shoulders.

"And after all this," I remarked, "I suppose you were ready to eat out of his hand."

"Don't be coarse, James. I don't know where you get these vulgar expressions from."

"Probably from my only link with the outside world—my patients. Unfortunately my practice does not lie amongst Royal princes and interesting Russian émigrés."

Caroline pushed her spectacles up and looked at me.

"You seem very grumpy, James. It must be your liver. A blue pill, I think, to-night."

To see me in my own home, you would never imagine that I was a doctor of medicine. Caroline does the home prescribing both for herself and me.

"Damn my liver," I said irritably. "Did you talk about the murder at all?"

"Well, naturally, James. What else is there to talk about locally? I was able to set M. Poirot right upon several points. He was very grateful to me. He said I had the makings of a born detective in me—and a wonderful psychological insight into human nature."

Caroline was exactly like a cat that is full to overflowing with rich cream. She was positively purring.

"He talked a lot about the little gray cells of the brain, and of their functions. His own, he says, are of the first quality."

"He would say so," I remarked bitterly. "Modesty is certainly not his middle name."

"I wish you would not be so horribly American, James. He thought it very important that Ralph should be found as soon as possible, and induced to come forward and give an account of himself. He says that his disappearance will produce a very unfortunate impression at the inquest."

"And what did you say to that?"

"I agreed with him," said Caroline importantly. "And I was able to tell him the way people were already talking about it."

"Caroline," I said sharply, "did you tell M. Poirot what you overheard in the wood that day?"

"I did," said Caroline complacently.

I got up and began to walk about.

"You realize what you're doing, I hope," I jerked out. "You're putting a halter round Ralph Paton's neck as surely as you're sitting in that chair."

"Not at all," said Caroline, quite unruffled. "I was surprised you hadn't told him."

"I took very good care not to," I said. "I'm fond of that boy."

"So am I. That's why I say you're talking nonsense. I don't believe Ralph did it, and so the truth can't hurt him, and we ought to give M. Poirot all the help we can. Why, think, very likely Ralph was out with that identical girl on the night of the murder, and if so, he's got a perfect alibi."

"If he's got a perfect alibi," I retorted, "why doesn't he come forward and say so?"

"Might get the girl into trouble," said Caroline sapiently. "But if M. Poirot gets hold of her, and puts it to her as her duty, she'll come forward of her own accord and clear Ralph."

"You seem to have invented a romantic fairy story of your own," I said. "You read too many trashy novels, Caroline. I've always told you so."

I dropped into my chair again.

"Did Poirot ask you any more questions?" I inquired.

"Only about the patients you had that morning."

"The patients?" I demanded, unbelievably.

"Yes, your surgery patients. How many and who they were?"

"Do you mean to say you were able to tell him that?" I demanded.

Caroline is really amazing.

"Why not?" asked my sister triumphantly. "I can see the path up to the surgery door perfectly from this window. And I've got an excellent memory, James. Much better than yours, let me tell you."

"I'm sure you have," I murmured mechanically.

My sister went on, checking the names on her fingers.

"There was old Mrs. Bennett, and that boy from the farm with the bad finger, Dolly Grice to have a needle out of her finger; that American steward off the liner. Let me see—that's four. Yes, and old George Evans with his ulcer. And lastly—"

She paused significantly.

"Well?"

Caroline brought out her climax triumphantly. She hissed in the most approved style—aided by the fortunate number of s's at her disposal.

"Miss Russell!"

She sat back in her chair and looked at me meaningly, and when Caroline looks at you meaningly, it is impossible to miss it.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, quite untruthfully. "Why shouldn't Miss Russell consult me about her bad knee?"

"Bad knee," said Caroline. "Fiddlesticks! No more bad knee than you and I. She was after something else."

"What?" I asked.

Caroline had to admit that she didn't know.

"But depend upon it, that was what he was trying to get at, M. Poirot, I mean. There's something fishy about that woman, and he knows it."

"Precisely the remark Mrs. Ackroyd made to me yesterday," I said. "That there was something fishy about Miss Russell."

"Ah!" said Caroline darkly, "Mrs. Ackroyd! There's another!"

"Another what?"

Caroline refused to explain her remarks. She merely nodded her head several times, rolled up her knitting, and went upstairs to don the high mauve silk blouse and the gold locket which she calls dressing for dinner.

I stayed there staring into the fire and thinking over Caroline's words. Had Poirot really come to gain information about Miss Russell, or was it only Caroline's tortuous mind that interpreted everything according to her own ideas?

There had certainly been nothing in Miss Russell's manner that morning to arouse suspicion. At least—

I remembered her persistent conversation on the subject of drug-taking and from that she had led the conversation to poisons and poisoning. But there was nothing in that. Ackroyd had not been poisoned. Still, it was odd. . . .

I heard Caroline's voice, rather acid in note, calling from the top of the stairs.

"James, you will be late for dinner."

I put some coal on the fire and went upstairs obediently.

It is well at any price to have peace in the home.

CHAPTER XII

ROUND THE TABLE

A joint inquest was held on Monday.

I do not propose to give the proceedings in detail. To do so would only be to go over the same ground again and again. By arrangement with the police, very little was allowed to come out. I gave evidence as to the cause

of Ackroyd's death and the probable time. The absence of Ralph Paton was commented on by the coroner, but not unduly stressed.

Afterwards, Poirot and I had a few words with Inspector Raglan. The inspector was very grave.

"It looks bad, Mr. Poirot," he said. "I'm trying to judge the thing fair and square. I'm a local man, and I've seen Captain Paton many times in Cranchester. I'm not wanting him to be the guilty one—but it's bad whichever way you look at it. If he's innocent, why doesn't he come forward? We've got evidence against him, but it's just possible that that evidence could be explained away. Then why doesn't he give an explanation?"

A lot more lay behind the inspector's words than I knew at the time. Ralph's description had been wired to every port and railway station in England. The police everywhere were on the alert. His rooms in town were watched, and any houses he had been known to be in the habit of frequenting. With such a *cordon* it seemed impossible that Ralph should be able to evade detection. He had no luggage, and, as far as any one knew, no money.

"I can't find any one who saw him at the station that night," continued the inspector. "And yet he's well known down here, and you'd think somebody would have noticed him. There's no news from Liverpool either."

"You think he went to Liverpool?" queried Poirot.

"Well, it's on the cards. That telephone message from the station, just three minutes before the Liverpool express left—there ought to be something in that."

"Unless it was deliberately intended to throw you off the scent. That might just possibly be the point of the telephone message."

"That's an idea," said the inspector eagerly. "Do you really think that's the explanation of the telephone call?"

"My friend," said Poirot gravely, "I do not know. But I will tell you this: I believe that when we find the explanation of that telephone call we shall find the explanation of the murder."

"You said something like that before, I remember," I observed, looking at him curiously.

Poirot nodded.

"I always come back to it," he said seriously.

"It seems to me utterly irrelevant," I declared.

"I wouldn't say that," demurred the inspector. "But I must confess I think Mr. Poirot here harps on it a little too much. We've better clues than that. The fingerprints on the dagger, for instance."

Poirot became suddenly very foreign in manner, as he often did when excited over anything.

"M. l'Inspecteur," he said, "beware of the blind—the blind—*comment dire?*—the little street that has no end to it."

Inspector Raglan stared, but I was quicker.

"You mean a blind alley?" I said.

"That is it—the blind street that leads nowhere. So it may be with those fingerprints—they may lead you nowhere."

"I don't see how that can well be," said the police officer. "I suppose you're hinting that they're faked? I've read of such things being done, though I can't say I've ever come across it in my experience. But fake or true—they're bound to lead *somewhere*."

Poirot merely shrugged his shoulders, flinging out his arms wide.

The inspector then showed us various enlarged photographs of the fingerprints, and proceeded to become technical on the subject of loops and whorls.

"Come now," he said at last, annoyed by Poirot's detached manner, "you've got to admit that those prints were made by some one who was in the house that night?"

"*Bien entendu*," said Poirot, nodding his head.

"Well, I've taken the prints of every member of the household, every one, mind you, from the old lady down to the kitchenmaid."

I don't think Mrs. Ackroyd would enjoy being referred to as the old lady. She must spend a considerable amount on cosmetics.

"Every one's," repeated the inspector fussily.

"Including mine," I said dryly.

"Very well. None of them correspond. That leaves us two alternatives. Ralph Paton, or the mysterious stranger the doctor here tells us about. When we get hold of those two——"

"Much valuable time may have been lost," broke in Poirot.

"I don't quite get you, Mr. Poirot?"

"You have taken the prints of every one in the house, you say," murmured Poirot. "Is that the exact truth you are telling me there, M. l'Inspecteur?"

"Certainly."

"Without overlooking any one?"

"Without overlooking any one."

"The quick or the dead?"

For a moment the inspector looked bewildered at what he took to be a religious observation. Then he reacted slowly.

"You mean——"

"The dead, M. l'Inspecteur."

The inspector still took a minute or two to understand.

"I am suggesting," said Poirot placidly, "that the fingerprints on the dagger handle are those of Mr. Ackroyd himself. It is an easy matter to verify. His body is still available."

"But why? What would be the point of it. You're surely not suggesting suicide, Mr. Poirot?"

"Ah! no. My theory is that the murderer wore gloves or wrapped something round his hand. After the blow was struck, he picked up the victim's hand and closed it round the dagger handle."

"But why?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders again.

"To make a confusing case even more confusing."

"Well," said the inspector, "I'll look into it. What gave you the idea in the first place?"

"When you were so kind as to show me the dagger and draw attention to the fingerprints. I know very little of loops and whorls—see, I confess my ignorance frankly. But it did occur to me that the position of the prints was somewhat awkward. Not so would I have held a dagger in order to strike. Naturally, with the right hand brought up over the shoulder backwards, it would have been difficult to put it in exactly the right position."

Inspector Raglan stared at the little man. Poirot, with an air of great unconcern, flicked a speck of dust from his coat sleeve.

"Well," said the inspector, "it's an idea. I'll look into it all right, but don't you be disappointed if nothing comes of it."

He endeavored to make his tone kindly and patronizing. Poirot watched him go off. Then he turned to me with twinkling eyes.

"Another time," he observed, "I must be more careful of his *amour propre*. And now that we are left to our own devices, what do you think, my good friend, of a little reunion of the family?"

The "little reunion," as Poirot called it, took place about half an hour later. We sat round the table in the dining-room at Fernly—Poirot at the head of the table, like the chairman of some ghastly board meeting. The servants were not present, so we were six in all. Mrs. Ackroyd, Flora, Major Blunt, young Raymond, Poirot, and myself.

When every one was assembled, Poirot rose and bowed.

"Messieurs, mesdames, I have called you together for a certain purpose." He paused. "To begin with, I want to make a very special plea to mademoiselle."

"To me?" said Flora.

"Mademoiselle, you are engaged to Captain Ralph Paton. If any one is in his confidence, you are. I beg you, most earnestly, if you know of his whereabouts, to persuade him to come forward. One little minute"—as Flora raised her head to speak—"say nothing till you have well reflected. Mademoiselle, his position grows daily more dangerous. If he had come forward at once, no matter how damning the facts, he might have had a chance of explaining them away. But this silence—this flight—what can it mean? Surely only one thing, knowledge of guilt. Mademoiselle, if you really believe in his innocence, persuade him to come forward before it is too late."

Flora's face had gone very white.

"Too late!" she repeated, very low.

Poirot leant forward, looking at her.

"See now, mademoiselle," he said very gently, "it is Papa Poirot who asks you this. The old Papa Poirot who has much knowledge and much experience. I would not seek to entrap you, mademoiselle. Will you not trust me—and tell me where Ralph Paton is hiding?"

The girl rose, and stood facing him.

"M. Poirot," she said in a clear voice, "I swear to you—swear solemnly—that I have no idea where Ralph is, and that I have neither seen him nor heard from him either on the day of—the murder, or since."

She sat down again. Poirot gazed at her in silence for a minute or two, then he brought his hand down on the table with a sharp rap.

"*Bien!* That is that," he said. His face hardened. "Now I appeal to these others who sit round this table, Mrs. Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Dr. Sheppard, Mr. Raymond. You are all friends and intimates of the missing man. If you know where Ralph Paton is hiding, speak out."

There was a long silence. Poirot looked to each in turn.

"I beg of you," he said in a low voice, "speak out."

But still there was silence, broken at last by Mrs. Ackroyd.

"I must say," she observed in a plaintive voice, "that Ralph's absence is most peculiar—most peculiar indeed. Not to come forward at such a time. It looks, you know, as though there were something *behind* it. I can't help thinking, Flora dear, that it was a very fortunate thing your engagement was never formally announced."

"Mother!" cried Flora angrily.

"Providence," declared Mrs. Ackroyd. "I have a devout belief in Providence—a divinity that shapes our ends, as Shakespeare's beautiful line runs."

"Surely you don't make the Almighty directly responsible for thick ankles, Mrs. Ackroyd, do you?" asked Geoffrey Raymond, his irresponsible laugh ringing out.

His idea was, I think, to loosen the tension, but Mrs. Ackroyd threw him a glance of reproach and took out her handkerchief.

"Flora has been saved a terrible amount of notoriety and unpleasantness. Not for a moment that I think dear Ralph had anything to do with poor Roger's death. I *don't* think so. But then I have a trusting heart—I always have had, ever since a child. I am loath to believe the worst of any one. But, of course, one must remember that Ralph was in several air raids as a young boy. The results are apparent long after, sometimes, they say. People are not responsible for their actions in the least. They lose control, you know, without being able to help it."

"Mother," cried Flora, "you don't think Ralph did it?"

"Come, Mrs. Ackroyd," said Blunt.

"I don't know what to think," said Mrs. Ackroyd tearfully. "It's all very upsetting. What would happen to the estate, I wonder, if Ralph were found guilty?"

Raymond pushed his chair away from the table violently. Major Blunt remained very quiet, looking thoughtfully at her. "Like shell-shock, you know," said Mrs. Ackroyd obstinately, "and I dare say Roger kept him very short of money—with the best intentions, of course. I can see you are all against me, but I do think it is very odd that Ralph has not come forward, and I must say I am thankful Flora's engagement was never announced formally."

"It will be to-morrow," said Flora in a clear voice.

"Floral" cried her mother, aghast.

Flora had turned to the secretary.

"Will you send the announcement to the *Morning Post* and the *Times*, please, Mr. Raymond."

"If you are sure that it is wise, Miss Ackroyd," he replied gravely.

She turned impulsively to Blunt.

"You understand," she said. "What else can I do? As things are, I must stand by Ralph. Don't you see that I must?"

She looked very searchingly at him, and after a long pause he nodded abruptly.

Mrs. Ackroyd burst out into shrill protests. Flora remained unmoved. Then Raymond spoke.

"I appreciate your motives, Miss Ackroyd. But don't you think you're being rather precipitate? Wait a day or two."

"To-morrow," said Flora, in a clear voice. "It's no good, mother, going on like this. Whatever else I am, I'm not disloyal to my friends."

"M. Poirot," Mrs. Ackroyd appealed tearfully, "can't you say anything at all?"

"Nothing to be said," interpolated Blunt. "She's doing the right thing. I'll stand by her through thick and thin."

Flora held out her hand to him.

"Thank you, Major Blunt," she said.

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "will you let an old man congratulate you on your courage and your loyalty? And will you not misunderstand me if I ask you—ask you most solemnly—to postpone the announcement you speak of for at least two days more?"

Flora hesitated.

"I asked it in Ralph Paton's interests as much as in yours, mademoiselle. You frown. You do not see how that can be. But I assure you that it is so.

Pas de blagues. You put the case into my hands—you must not hamper me now."

Flora paused a few minutes before replying.

"I do not like it," she said at last, "but I will do what you say."

She sat down again at the table.

"And now, messieurs et mesdames," said Poirot rapidly, "I will continue with what I was about to say. Understand this, I mean to arrive at the truth. The truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to the seeker after it. I am much aged, my powers may not be what they were." Here he clearly expected a contradiction. "In all probability this is the last case I shall ever investigate. But Hercule Poirot does not end with a failure. Messieurs et mesdames, I tell you, I mean to *know*. And I shall know—in spite of you all."

He brought out the last words provocatively, hurling them in our face as it were. I think we all flinched back a little, excepting Geoffrey Raymond, who remained good humored and imperturbable as usual.

"How do you mean—in spite of us all?" he asked, with slightly raised eyebrows.

"But—just that, monsieur. Every one of you in this room is concealing something from me." He raised his hand as a faint murmur of protest arose. "Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. It may be something unimportant—trivial—which is supposed to have no bearing on the case, but there it is. *Each one of you has something to hide.* Come, now, am I right?"

His glance, challenging and accusing, swept round the table. And every pair of eyes dropped before his. Yes, mine as well.

"I am answered," said Poirot, with a curious laugh. He got up from his seat. "I appeal to you all. Tell me the truth—the whole truth." There was a silence. "Will no one speak?"

He gave the same short laugh again.

"*C'est dommage,*" he said, and went out.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GOOSE QUILL

THAT EVENING, at Poirot's request, I went over to his house after dinner. Caroline saw me depart with visible reluctance. I think she would have liked to have accompanied me.

Poirot greeted me hospitably. He had placed a bottle of Irish whisky (which I detest) on a small table, with a soda water siphon and a glass. He himself was engaged in brewing hot chocolate. It was a favorite beverage of his, I discovered later.

He inquired politely after my sister, whom he declared to be a most interesting woman.

"I'm afraid you've been giving her a swelled head," I said dryly. "What about Sunday afternoon?"

He laughed and twinkled.

"I always like to employ the expert," he remarked obscurely, but he refused to explain the remark.

"You got all the local gossip anyway," I remarked. "True, and untrue."

"And a great deal of valuable information," he added quietly.

"Such as——?"

He shook his head.

"Why not have told me the truth?" he countered. "In a place like this, all Ralph Paton's doings were bound to be known. If your sister had not happened to pass through the wood that day somebody else would have done so."

"I suppose they would," I said grumpily. "What about this interest of yours in my patients?"

Again he twinkled.

"Only one of them, doctor. Only one of them."

"The last?" I hazarded.

"I find Miss Russell a study of the most interesting," he said evasively.

"Do you agree with my sister and Mrs. Ackroyd that there is something fishy about her?" I asked.

"Eh? What do you say—fishy?"

I explained to the best of my ability.

"And they say that, do they?"

"Didn't my sister convey as much to you yesterday afternoon?"

"*C'est possible.*"

"For no reason whatever," I declared.

"*Les femmes,*" generalized Poirot. "They are marvelous! They invent hazard—and by miracle they are right. Not that it is that, really. Women observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing that they are doing so. Their subconscious mind adds these little things together—and they call the result intuition. Me, I am very skilled in psychology. I know these things."

He swelled his chest out importantly, looking so ridiculous, that I found it difficult not to burst out laughing. Then he took a small sip of his chocolate, and carefully wiped his mustache.

"I wish you'd tell me," I burst out, "what you really think of it all?"

He put down his cup.

"You wish that?"

"I do."

"You have seen what I have seen. Should not our ideas be the same?"

"I'm afraid you're laughing at me," I said stiffly. "Of course, I've no experience of matters of this kind."

Poirot smiled at me indulgently.

"You are like the little child who wants to know the way the engine works. You wish to see the affair, not as the family doctor sees it, but with the eye of a detective who knows and cares for no one—to whom they are all strangers and all equally liable to suspicion."

"You put it very well," I said.

"So I give you then, a little lecture. The first thing is to get a clear history of what happened that evening—always bearing in mind that the person who speaks may be lying."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Rather a suspicious attitude."

"But necessary—I assure you, necessary. Now first—Dr. Sheppard leaves the house at ten minutes to nine. How do I know that?"

"Because I told you so."

"But you might not be speaking the truth—or the watch you went by might be wrong. But Parker also says that you left the house at ten minutes to nine. So we accept that statement and pass on. At nine o'clock you run into a man—and here we come to what we will call the Romance of the Mysterious Stranger—just outside the Park gates. How do I know that that is so?"

"I told you so," I began again, but Poirot interrupted me with a gesture of impatience.

"Ah! but it is that you are a little stupid to-night, my friend. *You* know that it is so—but how am *I* to know? *Eh bien*, I am able to tell you that the Mysterious Stranger was not a hallucination on your part, because the maid of a Miss Ganett met him a few minutes before you did, and of her too he inquired the way to Fernly Park. We accept his presence, therefore, and we can be fairly sure of two things about him—that he was a stranger to the neighborhood, and that whatever his object in going to Fernly, there was no great secrecy about it, since he twice asked the way there."

"Yes," I said, "I see that."

"Now I have made it my business to find out more about this man. He had a drink at the Three Boars, I learn, and the barmaid there says that he spoke with an American accent and mentioned having just come over from the States. Did it strike you that he had an American accent?"

"Yes, I think he had," I said, after a minute or two, during which I cast my mind back; "but a very slight one."

"*Précisément*. There is also this which, you will remember, I picked up in the summer-house?"

He held out to me the little quill. I looked at it curiously. Then a memory of something I had read stirred in me.

Poirot, who had been watching my face, nodded.

"Yes, heroin 'snow.' Drug-takers carry it like this, and sniff it up the nose."

"Diamorphine hydrochloride," I murmured mechanically.

"This method of taking the drug is very common on the other side. Another proof, if we wanted one, that the man came from Canada or the States."

"What first attracted your attention to that summer-house?" I asked curiously.

"My friend the inspector took it for granted that any one using that path did so as a short cut to the house, but as soon as I saw the summer-house, I realized that the same path would be taken by any one using the summer-house as a rendezvous. Now it seems fairly certain that the stranger came neither to the front nor to the back door. Then did some one from the house go out and meet him? If so, what could be a more convenient place than that little summer-house? I searched it with the hope that I might find some clew inside. I found two, the scrap of cambric and the quill."

"And the scrap of cambric?" I asked curiously. "What about that?"

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"You do not use your little gray cells," he remarked dryly. "The scrap of starched cambric should be obvious."

"Not very obvious to me." I changed the subject. "Anyway," I said, "this man went to the summer-house to meet somebody. Who was that somebody?"

"Exactly the question," said Poirot. "You will remember that Mrs. Ackroyd and her daughter came over from Canada to live here?"

"Is that what you meant to-day when you accused them of hiding the truth?"

"Perhaps. Now another point. What did you think of the parlormaid's story?"

"What story?"

"The story of her dismissal. Does it take half an hour to dismiss a servant? Was the story of those important papers a likely one? And remember, though she says she was in her bedroom from nine-thirty until ten o'clock, there is no one to confirm her statement."

"You bewilder me," I said.

"To me it grows clearer. But tell me now your own ideas and theories." I drew a piece of paper from my pocket.

"I just scribbled down a few suggestions," I said apologetically.

"But excellent—you have method. Let us hear them."

I read out in a somewhat embarrassed voice.

"To begin with, one must look at the thing logically——"

"Just what my poor Hastings used to say," interrupted Poirot, "but alas! he never did so."

"Point No. 1.—Mr. Ackroyd was heard talking to some one at half-past nine.

"Point No. 2.—At some time during the evening Ralph Paton must have come in through the window, as evidenced by the prints of his shoes.

"Point No. 3.—Mr. Ackroyd was nervous that evening, and would only have admitted some one he knew.

"Point No. 4.—The person with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty was asking for money. We know Ralph Paton was in a scrape.

"These four points go to show that the person with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty was Ralph Paton. But we know that Mr. Ackroyd was alive at a quarter to ten, therefore it was not Ralph who killed him. Ralph left the window open. Afterwards the murderer came in that way."

"And who was the murderer?" inquired Poirot.

"The American stranger. He may have been in league with Parker, and possibly in Parker we have the man who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. If so, Parker may have heard enough to realize the game was up, have told his accomplice so, and the latter did the crime with the dagger which Parker gave him."

"It is a theory that," admitted Poirot. "Decidedly you have cells of a kind. But it leaves a good deal unaccounted for."

"Such as——?"

"The telephone call, the pushed-out chair——"

"Do you really think the latter important?" I interrupted.

"Perhaps not," admitted my friend. "It may have been pulled out by accident, and Raymond or Blunt may have shoved it into place unconsciously under the stress of emotion. Then there is the missing forty pounds."

"Given by Ackroyd to Ralph," I suggested. "He may have reconsidered his first refusal."

"That still leaves one thing unexplained?"

"What?"

"Why was Blunt so certain in his own mind that it was Raymond with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty?"

"He explained that," I said.

"You think so? I will not press the point. Tell me instead, what were Ralph Paton's reasons for disappearing?"

"That's rather more difficult," I said slowly. "I shall have to speak as a medical man. Ralph's nerves must have gone phut! If he suddenly found out that his uncle had been murdered within a few minutes of his leaving him—after, perhaps, a rather stormy interview—well, he might get the wind

up and clear right out. Men have been known to do that—act guiltily when they're perfectly innocent."

"Yes, that is true," said Poirot. "But we must not lose sight of one thing."

"I know what you're going to say," I remarked: "motive. Ralph Paton inherits a great fortune by his uncle's death."

"That is one motive," agreed Poirot.

"One?"

"*Mais oui*. Do you realize that there are three separate motives staring us in the face? Somebody certainly stole the blue envelope and its contents. That is one motive. Blackmail! Ralph Paton may have been the man who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. Remember, as far as Hammond knew, Ralph Paton had not applied to his stepfather for help of late. That looks as though he were being supplied with money elsewhere. Then there is the fact that he was in some—how do you say—scrape?—which he feared might get to his stepfather's ears. And finally there is the one you have just mentioned."

"Dear me," I said, rather taken aback. "The case does seem black against him."

"Does it?" said Poirot. "That is where we disagree, you and I. Three motives—it is almost too much. I am inclined to believe that, after all, Ralph Paton is innocent."

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. ACKROYD

AFTER THE evening talk I have just chronicled, the affair seemed to me to enter on a different phase. The whole thing can be divided into two parts, each clear and distinct from the other. Part I. ranges from Ackroyd's death on the Friday evening to the following Monday night. It is the straightforward narrative of what occurred, as presented to Hercule Poirot. I was at Poirot's elbow the whole time. I saw what he saw. I tried my best to read his mind. As I know now, I failed in this latter task. Though Poirot showed me all his discoveries—as, for instance, the gold wedding ring—he held back the vital and yet logical impressions that he formed. As I came to know later, this secrecy was characteristic of him. He would throw out hints and suggestions, but beyond that he would not go.

As I say, up till the Monday evening, my narrative might have been that of Poirot himself. I played Watson to his Sherlock. But after Monday our ways diverged. Poirot was busy on his own account. I got to hear of what he was doing, because, in King's Abbot, you get to hear of everything, but he did not take me into his confidence beforehand. And I, too, had my own preoccupations.

On looking back, the thing that strikes me most is the piecemeal character of this period. Every one had a hand in the elucidation of the mystery. It was rather like a jig-saw puzzle to which every one contributed their own little piece of knowledge or discovery. But their task ended there. To Poirot alone belongs the renown of fitting those pieces into their correct place.

Some of the incidents seemed at the time irrelevant and unmeaning. There was, for instance, the question of the black boots. But that comes later. . . . To take things strictly in chronological order, I must begin with the summons from Mrs. Ackroyd.

She sent for me early on Tuesday morning, and since the summons sounded an urgent one, I hastened there, expecting to find her *in extremis*.

The lady was in bed. So much did she concede to the etiquette of the situation. She gave me her bony hand, and indicated a chair drawn up to the bedside.

"Well, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said, "and what's the matter with you?"

I spoke with that kind of spurious geniality which seems to be expected of general practitioners.

"I'm prostrated," said Mrs. Ackroyd in a faint voice. "Absolutely prostrated. It's the shock of poor Roger's death. They say these things often aren't felt at the *time*, you know. It's the reaction afterwards."

It is a pity that a doctor is precluded by his profession from being able sometimes to say what he really thinks.

I would have given anything to be able to answer "Bunkum!"

Instead, I suggested a tonic. Mrs. Ackroyd accepted the tonic. One move in the game seemed now to be concluded. Not for a moment did I imagine that I had been sent for because of the shock occasioned by Ackroyd's death. But Mrs. Ackroyd is totally incapable of pursuing a straight-forward course on any subject. She always approaches her object by tortuous means. I wondered very much why it was she had sent for me.

"And then that scene—yesterday," continued my patient.

She paused as though expecting me to take up a cue.

"What scene?"

"Doctor, how can you? Have you forgotten? That dreadful little Frenchman—or Belgian—or whatever he is. Bullying us all like he did. It has quite upset me. Coming on top of Roger's death."

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said.

"I don't know what he meant—shouting at us like he did. I should hope I know my duty too well to *dream* of concealing anything. I have given the police *every* assistance in my power."

Mrs. Ackroyd paused, and I said, "Quite so." I was beginning to have a glimmering of what all the trouble was about.

"No one can say that I have failed in my duty," continued Mrs. Ackroyd.

"I am sure Inspector Raglan is perfectly satisfied. Why should this little upstart of a foreigner make a fuss? A most ridiculous-looking creature he is too—just like a comic Frenchman in a revue. I can't think why Flora insisted on bringing him into the case. She never said a word to me about it. Just went off and did it on her own. Flora is too independent. I am a woman of the world and her mother. She should have come to me for advice first."

I listened to all this in silence.

"What does he think? That's what I want to know. Does he actually imagine I'm hiding something? He—he—positively *accused* me yesterday."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"It is surely of no consequence, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said. "Since you are not concealing anything, any remarks he may have made do not apply to you."

Mrs. Ackroyd went off at a tangent, after her usual fashion.

"Servants are so tiresome," she said. "They gossip, and talk amongst themselves. And then it gets round—and all the time there's probably nothing in it at all."

"Have the servants been talking?" I asked. "What about?"

Mrs. Ackroyd cast a very shrewd glance at me. It quite threw me off my balance.

"I was sure *you'd* know, doctor, if any one did. You were with M. Poirot all the time, weren't you?"

"I was."

"Then of course you know. It was that girl, Ursula Bourne, wasn't it? Naturally—she's leaving. She *would* want to make all the trouble she could. Spiteful, that's what they are. They're all alike. Now, you being there, doctor, you must know exactly what she did say? I'm most anxious that no wrong impression should get about. After all, you don't repeat every little detail to the police, do you? There are family matters sometimes—nothing to do with the question of the murder. But if the girl was spiteful, she may have made out all sorts of things."

I was shrewd enough to see that a very real anxiety lay behind these outpourings. Poirot had been justified in his premises. Of the six people round the table yesterday, Mrs. Ackroyd at least had had something to hide. It was for me to discover what that something might be.

"If I were you, Mrs. Ackroyd," I said brusquely, "I should make a clean breast of things."

She gave a little scream.

"Oh! doctor, how can you be so abrupt. It sounds as though—as though—And I can explain everything so simply."

"Then why not do so," I suggested.

Mrs. Ackroyd took out a frilled handkerchief, and became tearful.

"I thought, doctor, that you might put it to M. Poirot—explain it, you

know—because it's so difficult for a foreigner to see our point of view. And you don't know—nobody could know—what I've had to contend with. A martyrdom—a long martyrdom. That's what my life has been. I don't like to speak ill of the dead—but there it is. Not the smallest bill, but it had all to be gone over—just as though Roger had had a few miserly hundreds a year instead of being (as Mr. Hammond told me yesterday) one of the wealthiest men in these parts."

Mrs. Ackroyd paused to dab her eyes with the frilled handkerchief.

"Yes," I said encouragingly. "You were talking about bills?"

"Those dreadful bills. And some I didn't like to show Roger at all. They were things a man wouldn't understand. He would have said the things weren't necessary. And of course they mounted up, you know, and they kept coming in——"

She looked at me appealingly, as though asking me to condole with her on this striking peculiarity.

"It's a habit they have," I agreed.

"And the tone altered—became quite abusive. I assure you, doctor, I was becoming a nervous wreck. I couldn't sleep at nights. And a dreadful fluttering round the heart. And then I got a letter from a Scotch gentleman—as a matter of fact there were two letters—both Scotch gentlemen. Mr. Bruce MacPherson was one, and the other was Colin MacDonald. Quite a coincidence."

"Hardly that," I said dryly. "They are usually Scotch gentlemen, but I suspect a foreign strain in their ancestry."

"Ten pounds to ten thousand on note of hand alone," murmured Mrs. Ackroyd reminiscently. "I wrote to one of them, but it seemed there were difficulties."

She paused.

I gathered that we were just coming to delicate ground. I have never known any one more difficult to bring to the point.

"You see," murmured Mrs. Ackroyd, "it's all a question of expectations, isn't it? Testamentary expectations. And though, of course, I expected that Roger would provide for me, I didn't *know*. I thought that if only I could glance over a copy of his will—not in any sense of vulgar prying—but just so that I could make my own arrangements."

She glanced sideways at me. The position was now very delicate indeed. Fortunately words, ingeniously used, will serve to mask the ugliness of naked facts.

"I could only tell this to you, dear Dr. Sheppard," said Mrs. Ackroyd rapidly. "I can trust you not to misjudge me, and to represent the matter in the right light to M. Poirot. It was on Friday afternoon——"

She came to a stop and swallowed uncertainly.

"Yes," I repeated encouragingly. "On Friday afternoon. Well?"

"Every one was out, or so I thought. And I went into Roger's study—I had some real reason for going there—I mean, there was nothing underhand about it. And as I saw all the papers heaped on the desk, it just came to me, like a flash: 'I wonder if Roger keeps his will in one of the drawers of the desk.' I'm so impulsive, always was, from a child. I do things on the spur of the moment. He'd left his keys—very careless of him—in the lock of the top drawer."

"I see," I said helpfully. "So you searched the desk. Did you find the will?"

Mrs. Ackroyd gave a little scream, and I realized that I had not been sufficiently diplomatic.

"How dreadful it sounds. But it wasn't at all like that really."

"Of course it wasn't," I said hastily. "You must forgive my unfortunate way of putting things."

"You see, men are so peculiar. In dear Roger's place, I should not have objected to revealing the provisions of my will. But men are so secretive. One is forced to adopt little subterfuges in self-defence."

"And the result of the little subterfuge?" I asked.

"That's just what I'm telling you. As I got to the bottom drawer, Bourne came in. Most awkward. Of course I shut the drawer and stood up, and I called her attention to a few specks of dust on the surface. But I didn't like the way she looked—quite respectful in manner, but a very nasty light in her eyes. Almost contemptuous, if you know what I mean. I never have liked that girl very much. She's a good servant, and she says M'am, and doesn't object to wearing caps and aprons (which I declare to you a lot of them do nowadays), and she can say 'Not at home' without scruples if she has to answer the door instead of Parker, and she doesn't have those peculiar gurgling noises inside which so many parlormaid seem to have when they wait at table— Let me see, where was I?"

"You were saying, that in spite of several valuable qualities, you never liked Bourne."

"No more I do. She's—odd. There's something different about her from the others. Too well educated, that's my opinion. You can't tell who are ladies and who aren't nowadays."

"And what happened next?" I asked.

"Nothing. At least, Roger came in. And I thought he was out for a walk. And he said: 'What's all this?' and I said, 'Nothing. I just came in to fetch *Punch*.' And I took *Punch* and went out with it. Bourne stayed behind. I heard her asking Roger if she could speak to him for a minute. I went straight up to my room, to lie down. I was very upset."

There was a pause.

"You will explain to M. Poirot, won't you? You can see for yourself what

a trivial matter the whole thing was. But, of course, when he was so stern about concealing things, I thought of this at once. Bourne may have made some extraordinary story out of it, but you can explain, can't you?"

"That is all?" I said. "You have told me everything?"

"Ye-es," said Mrs. Ackroyd. "Oh! yes," she added firmly.

But I had noted the momentary hesitation, and I knew that there was still something she was keeping back. It was nothing less than a flash of sheer genius that prompted me to ask the question I did.

"Mrs. Ackroyd," I said, "was it you who left the silver table open?"

I had my answer in the blush of guilt that even rouge and powder could not conceal.

"How did you know?" she whispered.

"It was you, then?"

"Yes—I—you see—there were one or two pieces of old silver—very interesting. I had been reading up the subject and there was an illustration of quite a small piece which had fetched an immense sum at Christy's. It looked to me just the same as the one in the silver table. I thought I would take it up to London with me when I went—and—and have it valued. Then if it really was a valuable piece, just think what a charming surprise it would have been for Roger?"

I refrained from comments, accepting Mrs. Ackroyd's story on its merits. I even forbore to ask her why it was necessary to abstract what she wanted in such a surreptitious manner.

"Why did you leave the lid open?" I asked. "Did you forget?"

"I was startled," said Mrs. Ackroyd. "I heard footsteps coming along the terrace outside. I hastened out of the room and just got up the stairs before Parker opened the front door to you."

"That must have been Miss Russell," I said thoughtfully. Mrs. Ackroyd had revealed to me one fact that was extremely interesting. Whether her designs upon Ackroyd's silver had been strictly honorable I neither knew nor cared. What did interest me was the fact that Miss Russell must have entered the drawing-room by the window, and that I had not been wrong when I judged her to be out of breath with running. Where had she been? I thought of the summer-house and the scrap of cambric.

"I wonder if Miss Russell has her handkerchiefs starched!" I exclaimed on the spur of the moment.

Mrs. Ackroyd's start recalled me to myself, and I rose.

"You think you can explain to M. Poirot?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, certainly. Absolutely."

I got away at last, after being forced to listen to more justifications of her conduct.

The parlormaid was in the hall, and it was she who helped me on with my

overcoat. I observed her more closely than I had done heretofore. It was clear that she had been crying.

"How is it," I asked, "that you told us that Mr. Ackroyd sent for you on Friday to his study? I hear now that it was *you* who asked to speak to *him*?"

For a minute the girl's eyes dropped before mine.

Then she spoke.

"I meant to leave in any case," she said uncertainly.

I said no more. She opened the front door for me. Just as I was passing out, she said suddenly in a low voice:—

"Excuse me, sir, is there any news of Captain Paton?"

I shook my head, looking at her inquiringly.

"He ought to come back," she said. "Indeed—indeed he ought to come back."

She was looking at me with appealing eyes.

"Does no one know where he is?" she asked.

"Do you?" I said sharply.

She shook her head.

"No, indeed. I know nothing. But any one who was a friend to him would tell him this: he ought to come back."

I lingered, thinking that perhaps the girl would say more. Her next question surprised me.

"When do they think the murder was done? Just before ten o'clock?"

"That is the idea," I said. "Between a quarter to ten and the hour."

"Not earlier? Not before a quarter to ten?"

I looked at her attentively. She was so clearly eager for a reply in the affirmative.

"That's out of the question," I said. "Miss Ackroyd saw her uncle alive at a quarter to ten."

She turned away, and her whole figure seemed to droop.

"A handsome girl," I said to myself as I drove off. "An exceedingly handsome girl."

Caroline was at home. She had had a visit from Poirot and was very pleased and important about it.

"I am helping him with the case," she explained.

I felt rather uneasy. Caroline is bad enough as it is. What will she be like with her detective instincts encouraged?

"Are you going round the neighborhood looking for Ralph Paton's mysterious girl?" I inquired.

"I might do that on my own account," said Caroline. "No, this is a special thing M. Poirot wants me to find out for him."

"What is it?" I asked.

"He wants to know whether Ralph Paton's boots were black or brown," said Caroline with tremendous solemnity.

I stared at her. I see now that I was unbelievably stupid about these boots. I failed altogether to grasp the point.

"They were brown shoes," I said. "I saw them."

"Not shoes, James, boots. M. Poirot wants to know whether a pair of boots Ralph had with him at the hotel were brown or black. A lot hangs on it."

Call me dense if you like. I didn't see.

"And how are you going to find out?" I asked.

Caroline said there would be no difficulty about that. Our Annie's dearest friend was Miss Ganett's maid, Clara. And Clara was walking out with the Boots at the Three Boars. The whole thing was simplicity itself, and by the aid of Miss Ganett, who coöperated loyally, at once giving Clara leave of absence, the matter was rushed through at express speed.

It was when we were sitting down to lunch that Caroline remarked, with would-be unconcern:—

"About those boots of Ralph Paton's."

"Well," I said, "what about them?"

"M. Poirot thought they were probably brown. He was wrong. They're black."

And Caroline nodded her head several times. She evidently felt that she had scored a point over Poirot.

I did not answer. I was puzzling over what the color of a pair of Ralph Paton's boots had to do with the case.

CHAPTER XV

GEOFFREY RAYMOND

I WAS to have a further proof that day of the success of Poirot's tactics. That challenge of his had been a subtle touch born of his knowledge of human nature. A mixture of fear and guilt had wrung the truth from Mrs. Ackroyd. She was the first to react.

That afternoon when I returned from seeing my patients, Caroline told me that Geoffrey Raymond had just left.

"Did he want to see me?" I asked, as I hung up my coat in the hall.

Caroline was hovering by my elbow.

"It was M. Poirot he wanted to see," she said. "He'd just come from The Larches. M. Poirot was out. Mr. Raymond thought that he might be here, or that you might know where he was."

"I haven't the least idea."

"I tried to make him wait," said Caroline, "but he said he would call back

at The Larches in half an hour, and went away down the village. A great pity, because M. Poirot came in practically the minute after he left."

"Came in here?"

"No, to his own house."

"How do you know?"

"The side window," said Caroline briefly.

It seemed to me that we had now exhausted the topic. Caroline thought otherwise.

"Aren't you going across?"

"Across where?"

"To The Larches, of course."

"My dear Caroline," I said, "what for?"

"Mr. Raymond wanted to see him very particularly," said Caroline. "You might hear what it's all about."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Curiosity is not my besetting sin," I remarked coldly. "I can exist comfortably without knowing exactly what my neighbors are doing and thinking."

"Stuff and nonsense, James," said my sister. "You want to know just as much as I do. You're not so honest, that's all. You always have to pretend."

"Really, Caroline," I said, and retired into my surgery.

Ten minutes later Caroline tapped at the door and entered. In her hand she held what seemed to be a pot of jam.

"I wonder, James," she said, "if you would mind taking this pot of medlar jelly across to M. Poirot? I promised it to him. He has never tasted any home-made medlar jelly."

"Why can't Annie go?" I asked coldly.

"She's doing some mending. I can't spare her."

Caroline and I looked at each other.

"Very well," I said, rising. "But if I take the beastly thing, I shall just leave it at the door. You understand that?"

My sister raised her eyebrows.

"Naturally," she said. "Who suggested you should do anything else?"

The honors were with Caroline.

"If you do happen to see M. Poirot," she said, as I opened the front door, "you might tell him about the boots."

It was a most subtle parting shot. I wanted dreadfully to understand the enigma of the boots. When the old lady with the Breton cap opened the door to me, I found myself asking if M. Poirot was in, quite automatically.

Poirot sprang up to meet me, with every appearance of pleasure.

"Sit down, my good friend," he said. "The big chair? This small one? The room is not too hot, no?"

I thought it was stifling, but refrained from saying so. The windows were closed, and a large fire burned in the grate.

"The English people, they have a mania for the fresh air," declared Poirot. "The big air, it is all very well outside, where it belongs. Why admit it to the house? But let us not discuss such banalities. You have something for me, yes?"

"Two things," I said. "First—this—from my sister."

I handed over the pot of medlar jelly.

"How kind of Mademoiselle Caroline. She has remembered her promise. And the second thing?"

"Information—of a kind."

And I told him of my interview with Mrs. Ackroyd. He listened with interest, but not much excitement.

"It clears the ground," he said thoughtfully. "And it has a certain value as confirming the evidence of the housekeeper. She said, you remember, that she found the silver table lid open and closed it down in passing."

"What about her statement that she went into the drawing-room to see if the flowers were fresh?"

"Ah! we never took that very seriously, did we, my friend? It was patently an excuse, trumped up in a hurry, by a woman who felt it urgent to explain her presence—which, by the way, you would probably never have thought of questioning. I considered it possible that her agitation might arise from the fact that she had been tampering with the silver table, but I think now that we must look for another cause."

"Yes," I said. "Whom did she go out to meet? And why?"

"You think she went to meet some one?"

"I do."

Poirot nodded.

"So do I," he said thoughtfully.

There was a pause.

"By the way," I said, "I've got a message for you from my sister. Ralph Paton's boots were black, not brown."

I was watching him closely as I gave the message, and I fancied that I saw a momentary flicker of discomposure. If so, it passed almost immediately.

"She is absolutely positive they are not brown?"

"Absolutely."

"Ah!" said Poirot regretfully. "That is a pity."

And he seemed quite crestfallen.

He entered into no explanations, but at once started a new subject of conversation.

"The housekeeper, Miss Russell, who came to consult you on that Friday

morning—is it indiscreet to ask what passed at the interview—apart from the medical details, I mean?”

“Not at all,” I said. “When the professional part of the conversation was over, we talked for a few minutes about poisons, and the ease or difficulty of detecting them, and about drug-taking and drug-takers.”

“With special reference to cocaine?” asked Poirot.

“How did you know?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

For answer, the little man rose and crossed the room to where newspapers were filed. He brought me a copy of the *Daily Budget*, dated Friday, 16th September, and showed me an article dealing with the smuggling of cocaine. It was a somewhat lurid article, written with an eye to picturesque effect.

“That is what put cocaine into her head, my friend,” he said.

I would have catechized him further, for I did not quite understand his meaning, but at that moment the door opened and Geoffrey Raymond was announced.

He came in fresh and debonair as ever, and greeted us both.

“How are you, doctor? M. Poirot, this is the second time I’ve been here this morning. I was anxious to catch you.”

“Perhaps I’d better be off,” I suggested rather awkwardly.

“Not on my account, doctor. No, it’s just this,” he went on, seating himself at a wave of invitation from Poirot, “I’ve got a confession to make.”

“*En vérité?*” said Poirot, with an air of polite interest.

“Oh, it’s of no consequence, really. But, as a matter of fact, my conscience has been pricking me ever since yesterday afternoon. You accused us all of keeping back something, M. Poirot. I plead guilty. I’ve had something up my sleeve.”

“And what is that, M. Raymond?”

“As I say, it’s nothing of consequence—just this. I was in debt—badly, and that legacy came in the nick of time. Five hundred pounds puts me on my feet again with a little to spare.”

He smiled at us both with that engaging frankness that made him such a likable youngster.

“You know how it is. Suspicious looking policeman—don’t like to admit you were hard up for money—think it will look bad to them. But I was a fool, really, because Blunt and I were in the billiard room from a quarter to ten onwards, so I’ve got a watertight alibi and nothing to fear. Still, when you thundered out that stuff about concealing things, I felt a nasty prick of conscience, and I thought I’d like to get it off my mind.”

He got up again and stood smiling at us.

“You are a very wise young man,” said Poirot, nodding at him with approval. “See you, when I know that any one is hiding things from me, I

suspect that the thing hidden may be something very bad indeed. You have done well."

"I'm glad I'm cleared from suspicion," laughed Raymond. "I'll be off now."

"So that is that," I remarked, as the door closed behind the young secretary.

"Yes," agreed Poirot. "A mere bagatelle—but if he had not been in the billiard room—who knows? After all, many crimes have been committed for the sake of less than five hundred pounds. It all depends on what sum is sufficient to break a man. A question of the relativity, is it not so? Have you reflected, my friend, that many people in that house stood to benefit by Mr. Ackroyd's death? Mrs. Ackroyd, Miss Flora, young Mr. Raymond, the housekeeper, Miss Russell. Only one, in fact, does not, Major Blunt."

His tone in uttering that name was so peculiar that I looked up, puzzled.

"I don't quite understand you." I said.

"Two of the people I accused have given me the truth."

"You think Major Blunt has something to conceal also?"

"As for that," remarked Poirot nonchalantly, "there is a saying, is there not, that Englishmen conceal only one thing—their love? And Major Blunt, I should say, is not good at concealments."

"Sometimes," I said, "I wonder if we haven't rather jumped to conclusions on one point."

"What is that?"

"We've assumed that the blackmailer of Mrs. Ferrars is necessarily the murderer of Mr. Ackroyd. Mightn't we be mistaken?"

Poirot nodded energetically.

"Very good. Very good indeed. I wondered if that idea would come to you. Of course it is possible. But we must remember one point. The letter disappeared. Still, that, as you say, may not necessarily mean that the murderer took it. When you first found the body, Parker may have abstracted the letter unnoticed by you."

"Parker?"

"Yes, Parker. I always come back to Parker—not as the murderer—no, he did not commit the murder; but who is more suitable than he as the mysterious scoundrel who terrorized Mrs. Ferrars? He may have got his information about Mr. Ferrars's death from one of the King's Paddock servants. At any rate, he is more likely to have come upon it than a casual guest such as Blunt, for instance."

"Parker might have taken the letter," I admitted. "It wasn't till later that I noticed it was gone."

"How much later? After Blunt and Raymond were in the room, or before?"

"I can't remember," I said slowly. "I think it was before—no, afterwards. Yes, I'm almost sure it was afterwards."

"That widens the field to three," said Poirot thoughtfully. "But Parker is

the most likely. It is in my mind to try a little experiment with Parker. How say you, my friend, will you accompany me to Fernly?"

I acquiesced, and we set out at once. Poirot asked to see Miss Ackroyd, and presently Flora came to us.

"Mademoiselle Flora," said Poirot, "I have to confide in you a little secret. I am not yet satisfied of the innocence of Parker. I propose to make a little experiment with your assistance. I want to reconstruct some of his actions on that night. But we must think of something to tell him—ah! I have it. I wish to satisfy myself as to whether voices in the little lobby could have been heard outside on the terrace. Now, ring for Parker, if you will be so good."

I did so, and presently the butler appeared, suave as ever.

"You rang, sir?"

"Yes, my good Parker. I have in mind a little experiment. I have placed Major Blunt on the terrace outside the study window. I want to see if any one there could have heard the voices of Miss Ackroyd and yourself in the lobby that night. I want to enact that little scene over again. Perhaps you would fetch the tray or whatever it was you were carrying?"

Parker vanished, and we repaired to the lobby outside the study door. Presently we heard a chink in the outer hall, and Parker appeared in the doorway carrying a tray with a siphon, a decanter of whisky, and two glasses on it.

"One moment," cried Poirot, raising his hand and seemingly very excited. "We must have everything in order. Just as it occurred. It is a little method of mine."

"A foreign custom, sir," said Parker. "Reconstruction of the crime they call it, do they not?"

He was quite imperturbable as he stood there politely waiting on Poirot's orders.

"Ah! he knows something, the good Parker," cried Poirot. "He has read of those things. Now, I beg you, let us have everything of the most exact. You came from the outer hall—so. Mademoiselle was—where?"

"Here," said Flora, taking up her stand just outside the study door.

"Quite right, sir," said Parker.

"I had just closed the door," continued Flora.

"Yes, miss," agreed Parker. "Your hand was still on the handle as it is now."

"Then *allez*," said Poirot. "Play me the little comedy."

Flora stood with her hand on the door handle, and Parker came stepping through the door from the hall, bearing the tray.

He stopped just inside the door. Flora spoke.

"Oh! Parker. Mr. Ackroyd doesn't want to be disturbed again to-night."

"Is that right?" she added in an undertone.

"To the best of my recollection, Miss Flora," said Parker, "but I fancy

you used the word evening instead of night." Then, raising his voice in a somewhat theatrical fashion: "Very good, miss. Shall I lock up as usual?"

"Yes, please."

Parker retired through the door, Flora followed him, and started to ascend the main staircase.

"Is that enough?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Admirable," declared the little man, rubbing his hands. "By the way, Parker, are you sure there were two glasses on the tray that evening? Who was the second one for?"

"I always bring two glasses, sir," said Parker. "Is there anything further?"

"Nothing. I thank you."

Parker withdrew, dignified to the last.

Poirot stood in the middle of the hall frowning. Flora came down and joined us.

"Has your experiment been successful?" she asked. "I don't quite understand, you know——"

Poirot smiled admiringly at her.

"It is not necessary that you should," he said. "But tell me, were there indeed two glasses on Parker's tray that night?"

Flora wrinkled her brows a minute.

"I really can't remember," she said. "I think there were. Is—is that the object of your experiment?"

Poirot took her hand and patted it.

"Put it this way," he said. "I am always interested to see if people will speak the truth."

"And did Parker speak the truth?"

"I rather think he did," said Poirot thoughtfully.

A few minutes later saw us retracing our steps to the village.

"What was the point of that question about the glasses?" I asked curiously.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"One must say something," he remarked. "That particular question did as well as any other."

I stared at him.

"At any rate, my friend," he said more seriously, "I know now something I wanted to know. Let us leave it at that."

CHAPTER XVI

AN EVENING AT MAH JONG

THAT NIGHT we had a little Mah Jong party. This kind of simple entertainment is very popular in King's Abbot. The guests arrive in goloshes and waterproofs after dinner. They partake of coffee and later of cake, sandwiches, and tea.

On this particular night our guests were Miss Ganett and Colonel Carter, who lives near the church. A good deal of gossip is handed round at these evenings, sometimes seriously interfering with the game in progress. We used to play bridge—chatty bridge of the worst description. We find Mah Jong much more peaceful. The irritated demand as to why on earth your partner did not lead a certain card is entirely done away with, and though we still express criticisms frankly, there is not the same acrimonious spirit.

"Very cold evening, eh, Sheppard?" said Colonel Carter, standing with his back to the fire. Caroline had taken Miss Ganett to her own room, and was there assisting her to disentangle herself from her many wraps. "Reminds me of the Afghan passes."

"Indeed?" I said politely.

"Very mysterious business this about poor Ackroyd," continued the colonel, accepting a cup of coffee. "A deuce of a lot behind it—that's what I say. Between you and me, Sheppard, I've heard the word blackmail mentioned!"

The colonel gave me the look which might be tabulated "one man of the world to another."

"A woman in it, no doubt," he said. "Depend upon it, a woman in it."

Caroline and Miss Ganett joined us at this minute. Miss Ganett drank coffee whilst Caroline got out the Mah Jong box and poured out the tiles upon the table.

"Washing the tiles," said the colonel facetiously. "That's right—washing the tiles, as we used to say in the Shanghai Club."

It is the private opinion of both Caroline and myself that Colonel Carter has never been in the Shanghai Club in his life. More, that he has never been farther east than India, where he juggled with tins of bully beef and plum and apple jam during the Great War. But the colonel is determinedly military, and in King's Abbot we permit people to indulge their little idiosyncrasies freely.

"Shall we begin?" said Caroline.

We sat round the table. For some five minutes there was complete silence, owing to the fact that there is tremendous secret competition amongst us as to who can build their wall quickest.

"Go on, James," said Caroline at last. "You're East Wind."

I discarded a tile. A round or two proceeded, broken by the monotonous remarks of "Three Bamboos," "Two Circles," "Pung," and frequently from Miss Ganett "Unpung," owing to that lady's habit of too hastily claiming tiles to which she had no right.

"I saw Flora Ackroyd this morning," said Miss Ganett. "Pung—no—Unpung. I made a mistake."

"Four Circles," said Caroline. "Where did you see her?"

"She didn't see *me*," said Miss Ganett, with that tremendous significance only to be met with in small villages.

"Ah!" said Caroline interestedly. "Chow."

"I believe," said Miss Ganett, temporarily diverted, "that it's the right thing nowadays to say 'Chee' not 'Chow.'"

"Nonsense," said Caroline. "I have always said '*Chow*.'"

"In the Shanghai Club," said Colonel Carter, "they say '*Chow*.'"

Miss Ganett retired, crushed.

"What were you saying about Flora Ackroyd?" asked Caroline, after a moment or two devoted to the game. "Was she with any one?"

"Very much so," said Miss Ganett.

The eyes of the two ladies met, and seemed to exchange information.

"Really," said Caroline interestedly. "Is that it? Well, it doesn't surprise me in the least."

"We're waiting for you to discard, Miss Caroline," said the colonel. He sometimes affects the pose of the bluff male, intent on the game and indifferent to gossip. But nobody is deceived.

"If you ask me," said Miss Ganett. ("Was that a Bamboo you discarded, dear? Oh! no, I see now—it was a Circle.") As I was saying, if you ask me, Flora's been exceedingly lucky. Exceedingly lucky she's been."

"How's that, Miss Ganett?" asked the colonel. "I'll Pung that Green Dragon. How do you make out that Miss Flora's been lucky? Very charming girl and all that, I know."

"I mayn't know very much about crime," said Miss Ganett, with the air of one who knows everything there is to know, "but I can tell you one thing. The first question that's always asked is 'Who last saw the deceased alive?' And the person who did is regarded with suspicion. Now, Flora Ackroyd last saw her uncle alive. It might have looked very nasty for her—very nasty indeed. It's my opinion—and I give it for what it's worth, that Ralph Paton is staying away on her account, to draw suspicion away from her."

"Come, now," I protested mildly, "you surely can't suggest that a young girl like Flora Ackroyd is capable of stabbing her uncle in cold blood?"

"Well, I don't know," said Miss Ganett. "I've just been reading a book from the library about the underworld of Paris, and it says that some of the worst women criminals are young girls with the faces of angels."

"That's in France," said Caroline instantly.

"Just so," said the colonel. "Now, I'll tell you a very curious thing—a story that was going round the Bazaars in India. . . ."

The colonel's story was one of interminable length, and of curiously little interest. A thing that happened in India many years ago cannot compare for a moment with an event that took place in King's Abbot the day before yesterday.

It was Caroline who brought the colonel's story to a close by fortunately going Mah Jong. After the slight unpleasantness always occasioned by my corrections of Caroline's somewhat faulty arithmetic, we started a new hand.

"East Wind passes," said Caroline. "I've got an idea of my own about Ralph Paton. Three Characters. But I'm keeping it to myself for the present."

"Are you, dear?" said Miss Ganett. "Chow—I mean Pung."

"Yes," said Caroline firmly.

"Was it all right about the boots?" asked Miss Ganett. "Their being black, I mean?"

"Quite all right," said Caroline.

"What was the point, do you think?" asked Miss Ganett.

Caroline pursed up her lips, and shook her head with an air of knowing all about it.

"Pung," said Miss Ganett. "No—Unpung. I suppose that now the doctor's in with M. Poirot he knows all the secrets?"

"Far from it," I said.

"James is so modest," said Caroline. "Ah! a concealed Kong."

The colonel gave vent to a whistle. For the moment gossip was forgotten.

"Your own wind, too," he said. "And you've got two Pungs of Dragons. We must be careful. Miss Caroline's out for a big hand."

We played for some minutes with no irrelevant conversation.

"This M. Poirot now," said Colonel Carter, "is he really such a great detective?"

"The greatest the world has ever known," said Caroline solemnly. "He had to come here incognito to avoid publicity."

"Chow," said Miss Ganett. "Quite wonderful for our little village, I'm sure. By the way, Clara—my maid, you know—is great friends with Elsie, the housemaid at Fernly, and what do you think Elsie told her? That there's been a lot of money stolen, and it's her opinion—Elsie's—I mean, that the parlormaid had something to do with it. She's leaving at the month, and she's crying a good deal at night. If you ask me, the girl is very likely in league with a *gang*. She's always been a queer girl—she's not friends with any of the girls round here. She goes off by herself on her days out—very unnatural, I call it, and most suspicious. I asked her once to come to our Girls' Friendly Evenings, but she refused, and then I asked her a few ques-

tions about her home and her family—all that sort of thing, and I'm bound to say I considered her manner most impertinent. Outwardly very respectful—but she shut me up in the most barefaced way."

Miss Ganett stopped for breath, and the colonel, who was totally uninterested in the servant question, remarked that in the Shanghai Club brisk play was the invariable rule.

We had a round of brisk play.

"That Miss Russell," said Caroline. "She came here pretending to consult James on Friday morning. It's my opinion she wanted to see where the poisons were kept. Five Characters."

"Chow," said Miss Ganett. "What an extraordinary idea. I wonder if you can be right."

"Talking of poisons," said the colonel. "Eh—what? Haven't I discarded? Oh! Eight Bamboos."

"Mah Jong!" said Miss Ganett.

Caroline was very much annoyed.

"One Red Dragon," she said regretfully, "and I should have had a hand of three doubles."

"I've had two Red Dragons all the time," I mentioned.

"So exactly like you, James," said Caroline reproachfully. "You've no conception of the spirit of the game."

I myself thought I had played rather cleverly. I should have had to pay Caroline an enormous amount if she had gone Mah Jong. Miss Ganett's Mah Jong was of the poorest variety possible, as Caroline did not fail to point out to her.

East Wind passed, and we started a new hand in silence.

"What I was going to tell you just now was this," said Caroline.

"Yes?" said Miss Ganett encouragingly.

"My idea about Ralph Paton, I mean."

"Yes, dear," said Miss Ganett, still more encouragingly. "Chow!"

"It's a sign of weakness to Chow so early," said Caroline severely. "You should go for a big hand."

"I know," said Miss Ganett. "You were saying—about Ralph Paton, you know?"

"Yes. Well, I've a pretty shrewd idea where he is."

We all stopped to stare at her.

"This is very interesting, Miss Caroline," said Colonel Carter. "All your own idea, eh?"

"Well, not exactly. I'll tell you about it. You know that big map of the county we have in the hall?"

We all said Yes.

"As M. Poirot was going out the other day, he stopped and looked at it,

and he made some remark—I can't remember exactly what it was. Something about Cranchester being the only big town anywhere near us—which is true, of course. But after he had gone—it came to me suddenly."

"What came to you?"

"His meaning. Of course Ralph is in Cranchester."

It was at that moment that I knocked down the rack that held my pieces. My sister immediately reproved me for clumsiness, but half-heartedly. She was intent on her theory.

"Cranchester, Miss Caroline?" said Colonel Carter. "Surely not Cranchester! It's so near."

"That's exactly it," cried Caroline triumphantly. "It seems quite clear by now that he didn't get away from here by train. He must simply have walked into Cranchester. And I believe he's there still. No one would dream of his being so near at hand."

I pointed out several objections to the theory, but when once Caroline has got something firmly into her head, nothing dislodges it.

"And you think M. Poirot has the same idea," said Miss Ganett thoughtfully. "It's a curious coincidence, but I was out for a walk this afternoon on the Cranchester road, and he passed me in a car coming from that direction."

We all looked at each other.

"Why, dear me," said Miss Ganett suddenly, "I'm Mah Jong all the time, and I never noticed it."

Caroline's attention was distracted from her own inventive exercises. She pointed out to Miss Ganett that a hand consisting of mixed suits and too many Chows was hardly worth going Mah Jong on. Miss Ganett listened imperturbably and collected her counters.

"Yes, dear, I know what you mean," she said. "But it rather depends on what kind of a hand you have to start with, doesn't it?"

"You'll never get the big hands if you don't go for them," urged Caroline.

"Well, we must all play our own way, mustn't we?" said Miss Ganett. She looked down at her counters. "After all, I'm up, so far."

Caroline, who was considerably down, said nothing.

East Wind passed, and we set to once more. Annie brought in the tea things. Caroline and Miss Ganett were both slightly ruffled as is often the case during one of these festive evenings.

"If you would only play a leetle quicker, dear," said Caroline, as Miss Ganett hesitated over her discard. "The Chinese put down the tiles so quickly it sounds like little birds pattering."

For some few minutes we played like the Chinese.

"You haven't contributed much to the sum of information, Sheppard," said Colonel Carter genially. "You're a sly dog. Hand in glove with the great detective, and not a hint as to the way things are going."

"James is an extraordinary creature," said Caroline. "He can *not* bring himself to part with information."

She looked at me with some disfavor.

"I assure you," I said, "that I don't know anything. Poirot keeps his own counsel."

"Wise man," said the colonel with a chuckle. "He doesn't give himself away. But they're wonderful fellows, these foreign detectives. Up to all sorts of dodges, I believe."

"Pung," said Miss Ganett, in a tone of quiet triumph. "And Mah Jong."

The situation became more strained. It was annoyance at Miss Ganett's going Mah Jong for the third time running which prompted Caroline to say to me as we built a fresh wall:—

"You are too tiresome, James. You sit there like a dead head, and say nothing at all!"

"But, my dear," I protested, "I have really nothing to say—that is, of the kind you mean."

"Nonsense," said Caroline, as she sorted her hand. "You *must* know something interesting."

I did not answer for a moment. I was overwhelmed and intoxicated. I had read of there being such a thing as the Perfect Winning—going Mah Jong on one's original hand. I had never hoped to hold the hand myself.

With suppressed triumph I laid my hand face upwards on the table.

"As they say in the Shanghai Club," I remarked, "Tin-ho—the Perfect Winning!"

The colonel's eyes nearly bulged out of his head.

"Upon my soul," he said. "What an extraordinary thing. I never saw that happen before!"

It was then that I went on, goaded by Caroline's gibes, and rendered reckless by my triumph.

"And as to anything interesting," I said. "What about a gold wedding ring with a date and 'From R.' inside?"

I pass over the scene that followed. I was made to say exactly where this treasure was found. I was made to reveal the date.

"March 13th," said Caroline. "Just six months ago. Ah!"

Out of the babel of excited suggestions and suppositions three theories were evolved:—

1. That of Colonel Carter: that Ralph was secretly married to Flora. The first or most simple solution.

2. That of Miss Ganett: that Roger Ackroyd had been secretly married to Mrs. Ferrars.

3. That of my sister: that Roger Ackroyd had married his housekeeper, Miss Russell.

A fourth or super-theory was propounded by Caroline later as we went up to bed.

"Mark my words," she said suddenly, "I shouldn't be at all surprised if Geoffrey Raymond and Flora weren't married."

"Surely it would be 'From G.,' not 'From R.' then," I suggested.

"You never know. Some girls call men by their surnames. And you heard what Miss Ganett said this evening—about Flora's carryings on."

Strictly speaking, I had not heard Miss Ganett say anything of the kind, but I respected Caroline's knowledge of innuendoes.

"How about Hector Blunt," I hinted. "If it's anybody——"

"Nonsense," said Caroline. "I dare say he admires her—may even be in love with her. But depend upon it a girl isn't going to fall in love with a man old enough to be her father when there's a good-looking young secretary about. She may encourage Major Blunt just as a blind. Girls are very artful. But there's one thing I *do* tell you, James Sheppard. Flora Ackroyd does not care a penny piece for Ralph Paton, and never has. You can take it from me."

I took it from her meekly.

CHAPTER XVII

PARKER

IT OCCURRED to me the next morning that under the exhilaration produced by Tin-ho, or the Perfect Winning, I might have been slightly indiscreet. True, Poirot had not asked me to keep the discovery of the ring to myself. On the other hand, he had said nothing about it whilst at Fernly, and as far as I knew, I was the only person aware that it had been found. I felt distinctly guilty. The fact was by now spreading through King's Abbot like wildfire. I was expecting wholesale reproaches from Poirot any minute.

The joint funeral of Mrs. Ferrars and Roger Ackroyd was fixed for eleven o'clock. It was a melancholy and impressive ceremony. All the party from Fernly were there.

After it was over, Poirot, who had also been present, took me by the arm, and invited me to accompany him back to The Larches. He was looking very grave, and I feared that my indiscretion of the night before had got round to his ears. But it soon transpired that his thoughts were occupied by something of a totally different nature.

"See you," he said. "We must act. With your help I propose to examine a witness. We will question him, we will put such fear into him that the truth is bound to come out."

"What witness are you talking of?" I asked, very much surprised.

"Parker!" said Poirot. "I asked him to be at my house this morning at twelve o'clock. He should await us there at this very minute."

"What do you think," I ventured, glancing sideways at his face.

"I know this—that I am not satisfied."

"You think that it was he who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars?"

"Either that, or——"

"Well?" I said, after waiting a minute or two.

"My friend, I will say this to you—I hope it was he."

The gravity of his manner, and something indefinable that tinged it, reduced me to silence.

On arrival at The Larches, we were informed that Parker was already there awaiting our return. As we entered the room, the butler rose respectfully.

"Good-morning, Parker," said Poirot pleasantly. "One instant, I pray of you."

He removed his overcoat and gloves.

"Allow me, sir," said Parker, and sprang forward to assist him. He deposited the articles neatly on a chair by the door. Poirot watched him with approval.

"Thank you, my good Parker," he said. "Take a seat, will you not? What I have to say may take some time."

Parker seated himself with an apologetic bend of the head.

"Now what do you think I asked you to come here for this morning—eh?"

Parker coughed.

"I understood, sir, that you wished to ask me a few questions about my late master—private like."

"*Précisément*," said Poirot, beaming. "Have you made many experiments in blackmail?"

"Sir!"

The butler sprang to his feet.

"Do not excite yourself," said Poirot placidly. "Do not play the farce of the honest, injured man. You know all there is to know about the blackmail, is it not so?"

"Sir, I—I've never—never been——"

"Insulted," suggested Poirot, "in such a way before. Then why, my excellent Parker, were you so anxious to overhear the conversation in Mr. Ackroyd's study the other evening, after you had caught the word blackmail?"

"I wasn't—I——"

"Who was your last master?" rapped out Poirot suddenly.

"My last master?"

"Yes, the master you were with before you came to Mr. Ackroyd."

"A Major Ellerby, sir——"

Poirot took the words out of his mouth.

"Just so, Major Ellerby. Major Ellerby was addicted to drugs, was he not? You traveled about with him. When he was in Bermuda there was some trouble—a man was killed. Major Ellerby was partly responsible. It was hushed up. But you knew about it. How much did Major Ellerby pay you to keep your mouth shut?"

Parker was staring at him open-mouthed. The man had gone to pieces, his cheeks shook flabbily.

"You see, me, I have made inquiries," said Poirot pleasantly. "It is as I say. You got a good sum then as blackmail, and Major Ellerby went on paying you until he died. Now I want to hear about your latest experiment."

Parker still stared.

"It is useless to deny. Hercule Poirot *knows*. It is so, what I have said about Major Ellerby, is it not?"

As though against his will, Parker nodded reluctantly once. His face was ashen pale.

"But I never hurt a hair of Mr. Ackroyd's head," he moaned. "Honest to God, sir, I didn't. I've been afraid of this coming all the time. And I tell you I didn't—I didn't kill him."

His voice rose almost to a scream.

"I am inclined to believe you, my friend," said Poirot. "You have not the nerve—the courage. But I must have the truth."

"I'll tell you anything, sir, anything you want to know. It's true that I tried to listen that night. A word or two I heard made me curious. And Mr. Ackroyd's wanting not to be disturbed, and shutting himself up with the doctor the way he did. It's God's own truth what I told the police. I heard the word blackmail, sir, and well—"

He paused.

"You thought there might be something in it for you?" suggested Poirot smoothly.

"Well—well, yes, I did, sir. I thought that if Mr. Ackroyd was being blackmailed, why shouldn't I have a share of the pickings?"

A very curious expression passed over Poirot's face. He leaned forward.

"Had you any reason to suppose before that night that Mr. Ackroyd was being blackmailed?"

"No, indeed, sir. It was a great surprise to me. Such a regular gentleman in all his habits."

"How much did you overhear?"

"Not very much, sir. There seemed what I might call a spite against me. Of course I had to attend to my duties in the pantry. And when I did creep along once or twice to the study it was no use. The first time Dr. Sheppard came out and almost caught me in the act, and another time Mr. Raymond

passed me in the big hall and went that way, so I knew it was no use; and when I went with the tray, Miss Flora headed me off."

Poirot stared for a long time at the man, as if to test his sincerity. Parker returned his gaze earnestly.

"I hope you believe me, sir. I've been afraid all along the police would rake up that old business with Major Ellerby and be suspicious of me in consequence."

"*Eh bien*," said Poirot at last. "I am disposed to believe you. But there is one thing I must request of you—to show me your bank-book. You have a bank-book, I presume?"

"Yes, sir, as a matter of fact, I have it with me now."

With no sign of confusion, he produced it from his pocket. Poirot took the slim, green-covered book and perused the entries.

"Ah! I perceive you have purchased £500 of National Savings Certificates this year?"

"Yes, sir. I have already over a thousand pounds saved—the result of my connection with—er—my late master, Major Ellerby. And I have had quite a little flutter on some horses this year—very successful. If you remember, sir, a rank outsider won the Jubilee. I was fortunate enough to back it—£20."

Poirot handed him back the book.

"I will wish you good-morning. I believe that you have told me the truth. If you have not—so much the worse for you, my friend."

When Parker had departed, Poirot picked up his overcoat once more.

"Going out again?" I asked.

"Yes, we will pay a little visit to the good M. Hammond."

"You believe Parker's story?"

"It is credible enough on the face of it. It seems clear that—unless he is a very good actor indeed—he genuinely believes it was Ackroyd himself who was the victim of blackmail. If so, he knows nothing at all about the Mrs. Ferrars business."

"Then in that case—who——"

"*Précisément!* Who? But our visit to M. Hammond will accomplish one purpose. It will either clear Parker completely or else——"

"Well?"

"I fall into the bad habit of leaving my sentences unfinished this morning," said Poirot apologetically. "You must bear with me."

"By the way," I said, rather sheepishly, "I've got a confession to make. I'm afraid I have inadvertently let out something about that ring."

"What ring?"

"The ring you found in the goldfish pond."

"Ah! yes," said Poirot, smiling broadly.

"I hope you're not annoyed? It was very careless of me."

"But not at all, my good friend, not at all. I laid no commands upon you. You were at liberty to speak of it if you so wished. She was interested, your sister?"

"She was indeed. It created a sensation. All sorts of theories are flying about."

"Ah! And yet it is so simple. The true explanation leapt to the eye, did it not?"

"Did it?" I said dryly.

Poirot laughed.

"The wise man does not commit himself," he observed. "Is not that so? But here we are at M. Hammond's."

The lawyer was in his office, and we were ushered in without any delay. He rose and greeted us in his dry, precise manner.

Poirot came at once to the point.

"Monsieur, I desire from you certain information, that is, if you will be so good as to give it to me. You acted, I understand, for the late Mrs. Ferrars of King's Paddock?"

I noticed the swift gleam of surprise which showed in the lawyer's eyes, before his professional reserve came down once more like a mask over his face.

"Certainly. All her affairs passed through our hands."

"Very good. Now, before I ask you to tell me anything, I should like you to listen to the story Dr. Sheppard will relate to you. You have no objection, have you, my friend, to repeating the conversation you had with Mr. Ackroyd last Friday night?"

"Not in the least," I said, and straightway began the recital of that strange evening.

Hammond listened with close attention.

"That is all," I said, when I had finished.

"Blackmail," said the lawyer thoughtfully.

"You are surprised?" asked Poirot.

The lawyer took off his pince-nez and polished them with his handkerchief.

"No," he replied, "I can hardly say that I am surprised. I have suspected something of the kind for some time."

"That brings us," said Poirot, "to the information for which I am asking. If any one can give us an idea of the actual sums paid, you are the man, monsieur."

"I see no object in withholding the information," said Hammond, after a moment or two. "During the past year, Mrs. Ferrars has sold out certain securities, and the money for them was paid into her account and not re-invested. As her income was a large one, and she lived very quietly after her husband's death, it seems certain that these sums of money were paid

away for some special purpose. I once sounded her on the subject, and she said that she was obliged to support several of her husband's poor relations. I let the matter drop, of course. Until now, I have always imagined that the money was paid to some woman who had had a claim on Ashley Ferrars. I never dreamed that Mrs. Ferrars herself was involved."

"And the amount?" asked Poirot.

"In all, I should say the various sums totaled at least twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand pounds!" I exclaimed. "In one year!"

"Mrs. Ferrars was a very wealthy woman," said Poirot dryly. "And the penalty for murder is not a pleasant one."

"Is there anything else that I can tell you?" inquired Mr. Hammond.

"I thank you, no," said Poirot, rising. "All my excuses for having deranged you."

"Not at all, not at all."

"The word *derange*," I remarked, when we were outside again, "is applicable to mental disorder only."

"Ah!" cried Poirot, "never will my English be quite perfect. A curious language. I should then have said *disarranged*, *n'est ce pas?*"

"Disturbed is the word you had in mind."

"I thank you, my friend. The word *exact*, you are zealous for it. *Eh bien*, what about our friend Parker now? With twenty thousand pounds in hand, would he have continued being a butler? *Je ne pense pas*. It is, of course, possible that he banked the money under another name, but I am disposed to believe he spoke the truth to us. If he is a scoundrel, he is a scoundrel on a mean scale. He has not the big ideas. That leaves us as a possibility, Raymond, or—well—Major Blunt."

"Surely not Raymond," I objected. "Since we know that he was desperately hard up for a matter of five hundred pounds."

"That is what he says, yes."

"And as to Hector Blunt—"

"I will tell you something as to the good Major Blunt," interrupted Poirot. "It is my business to make inquiries. I make them. *Eh bien*—that legacy of which he speaks, I have discovered that the amount of it was close upon twenty thousand pounds. What do you think of that?"

I was so taken aback that I could hardly speak.

"It's impossible," I said at last. "A well-known man like Hector Blunt." Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows? At least he is a man with big ideas. I confess that I hardly see him as a blackmailer, but there is another possibility that you have not even considered."

"What is that?"

"The fire, my friend. Ackroyd himself may have destroyed that letter, blue envelope and all, after you left him."

"I hardly think that likely," I said slowly. "And yet—of course, it may be so. He might have changed his mind."

We had just arrived at my house, and on the spur of the moment I invited Poirot to come in and take pot luck.

I thought Caroline would be pleased with me, but it is hard to satisfy one's women folk. It appears that we were eating chops for lunch—the kitchen staff being regaled on tripe and onions. And two chops set before three people are productive of embarrassment.

But Caroline is seldom daunted for long. With magnificent mendacity, she explained to Poirot that although James laughed at her for doing so, she adhered strictly to a vegetarian diet. She descanted ecstatically on the delights of nut cutlets (which I am quite sure she has never tasted) and ate a Welsh rarebit with gusto and frequent cutting remarks as to the dangers of "flesh" foods.

Afterwards, when we were sitting in front of the fire and smoking, Caroline attacked Poirot directly.

"Not found Ralph Paton yet?" she asked.

"Where should I find him, mademoiselle?"

"I thought, perhaps, you'd found him in Cranchester," said Caroline, with intense meaning in her tone.

Poirot looked merely bewildered.

"In Cranchester? But why in Cranchester?"

I enlightened him with a touch of malice.

"One of our ample staff of private detectives happened to see you in a car on the Cranchester road yesterday," I explained.

Poirot's bewilderment vanished. He laughed heartily.

"Ah, that! A simple visit to the dentist, *c'est tout*. My tooth, it aches. I go there. My tooth, it is at once better. I think to return quickly. The dentist, he says No. Better to have it out. I argue. He insists. He has his way! That particular tooth, it will never ache again."

Caroline collapsed rather like a pricked balloon.

We fell to discussing Ralph Paton.

"A weak nature," I insisted. "But not a vicious one."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "But weakness, where does it end?"

"Exactly," said Caroline. "Take James here—weak as water, if I weren't about to look after him."

"My dear Caroline," I said irritably, "can't you talk without dragging in personalities?"

"You *are* weak, James," said Caroline, quite unmoved. "I'm eight years older than you are—oh! I don't mind M. Poirot knowing that—"

"I should never have guessed it, mademoiselle," said Poirot, with a gallant little bow.

"Eight years older. But I've always considered it my duty to look after you. With a bad bringing up, Heaven knows what mischief you might have got into by now."

"I might have married a beautiful adventuress," I murmured, gazing at the ceiling, and blowing smoke rings.

"Adventuress!" said Caroline, with a snort. "If we're talking of adventuresses——"

She left the sentence unfinished.

"Well?" I said, with some curiosity.

"Nothing. But I can think of some one not a hundred miles away."

Then she turned to Poirot suddenly.

"James sticks to it that you believe some one in the house committed the murder. All I can say is, you're wrong."

"I should not like to be wrong," said Poirot. "It is not—how do you say—my *metier*?"

"I've got the facts pretty clearly," continued Caroline, taking no notice of Poirot's remark, "from James and others. As far as I can see, of the people in the house, only two *could* have had the chance of doing it. Ralph Paton and Flora Ackroyd."

"My dear Caroline——"

"Now, James, don't interrupt me. I know what I'm talking about. Parker met her *outside* the door, didn't he? He didn't hear her uncle saying good-night to her. She could have killed him then and there."

"Caroline."

"I'm not saying she *did*, James. I'm saying she *could* have done. As a matter of fact, though Flora is like all these young girls nowadays, with no veneration for their betters and thinking they know best on every subject under the sun, I don't for a minute believe she'd kill even a chicken. But there it is. Mr. Raymond and Major Blunt have alibis. Mrs. Ackroyd's got an alibi. Even that Russell woman seems to have one—and a good job for her it is she has. Who is left? Only Ralph and Flora! And say what you will, I don't believe Ralph Paton is a murderer. A boy we've known all our lives."

Poirot was silent for a minute, watching the curling smoke rise from his cigarette. When at last he spoke, it was in a gentle far-away voice that produced a curious impression. It was totally unlike his usual manner.

"Let us take a man—a very ordinary man. A man with no idea of murder in his heart. There is in him somewhere a strain of weakness—deep down. It has so far never been called into play. Perhaps it never will be—and if so he will go to his grave honored and respected by every one. But let us suppose that something occurs. He is in difficulties—or perhaps not that even. He

may stumble by accident on a secret—a secret involving life or death to some one. And his first impulse will be to speak out—to do his duty as an honest citizen. And then the strain of weakness tells. Here is a chance of money—a great amount of money. He wants money—he desires it—and it is so easy. He has to do nothing for it—just keep silence. That is the beginning. The desire for money grows. He must have more—and more! He is intoxicated by the gold mine which has opened at his feet. He becomes greedy. And in his greed he overreaches himself. One can press a man as far as one likes—but with a woman one must not press too far. For a woman has at heart a great desire to speak the truth. How many husbands who have deceived their wives go comfortably to their graves, carrying their secret with them! How many wives who have deceived their husbands wreck their lives by throwing the fact in those same husbands' teeth! They have been pressed too far. In a reckless moment (which they will afterwards regret, *bien entendu*) they fling safety to the winds and turn at bay, proclaiming the truth with great momentary satisfaction to themselves. So it was, I think, in this case. The strain was too great. And so there came your proverb, the death of the goose that laid the golden eggs. But that is not the end. Exposure faced the man of whom we are speaking. And he is not the same man he was—say, a year ago. His moral fiber is blunted. He is desperate. He is fighting a losing battle, and he is prepared to take any means that come to his hand, for exposure means ruin to him. And so—the dagger strikes!”

He was silent for a moment. It was as though he had laid a spell upon the room. I cannot try to describe the impression his words produced. There was something in the merciless analysis, and the ruthless power of vision which struck fear into both of us.

“Afterwards,” he went on softly, “the danger removed, he will be himself again, normal, kindly. But if the need again arises, then once more he will strike.”

Caroline roused herself at last.

“You are speaking of Ralph Paton,” she said. “You may be right, you may not, but you have no business to condemn a man unheard.”

The telephone bell rang sharply. I went out into the hall, and took off the receiver.

“What?” I said. “Yes. Dr. Sheppard speaking.”

I listened for a minute or two, then replied briefly. Replacing the receiver, I went back into the drawing-room.

“Poirot,” I said, “they have detained a man at Liverpool. His name is Charles Kent, and he is believed to be the stranger who visited Fernly that night. They want me to go to Liverpool at once and identify him.”

CHAPTER XVIII

CHARLES KENT

HALF AN hour later saw Poirot, myself, and Inspector Raglan in the train on the way to Liverpool. The inspector was clearly very excited.

"We may get a line on the blackmailing part of the business, if on nothing else," he declared jubilantly. "He's a rough customer, this fellow, by what I heard over the phone. Takes dope, too. We ought to find it easy to get what we want out of him. If there was the shadow of a motive, nothing's more likely than that he killed Mr. Ackroyd. But in that case, why is young Paton keeping out of the way? The whole thing's a muddle—that's what it is. By the way, M. Poirot, you were quite right about those fingerprints. They were Mr. Ackroyd's own. I had rather the same idea myself, but I dismissed it as hardly feasible."

I smiled to myself. Inspector Raglan was so very plainly saving his face.

"As regards this man," said Poirot, "he is not yet arrested, eh?"

"No, detained under suspicion."

"And what account does he give of himself?"

"Precious little," said the inspector, with a grin. "He's a wary bird, I gather. A lot of abuse, but very little more."

On arrival at Liverpool I was surprised to find that Poirot was welcomed with acclamation. Superintendent Hayes, who met us, had worked with Poirot over some case long ago, and had evidently an exaggerated opinion of his powers.

"Now we've got M. Poirot here we shan't be long," he said cheerfully. "I thought you'd retired, moosior?"

"So I had, my good Hayes, so I had. But how tedious is retirement! You cannot imagine to yourself the monotony with which day comes after day."

"Very likely. So you've come to have a look at our own particular find? Is this Dr. Sheppard? Think you'll be able to identify him, sir?"

"I'm not very sure," I said doubtfully.

"How did you get hold of him?" inquired Poirot.

"Description was circulated, as you know. In the press and privately. Not much to go on, I admit. This fellow has an American accent all right, and he doesn't deny that he was near King's Abbot that night. Just asks what the hell it is to do with us, and that he'll see us in — before he answers any questions."

"Is it permitted that I, too, see him?" asked Poirot.

The superintendent closed one eye knowingly.

"Very glad to have you, sir. You've got permission to do anything you please. Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard was asking after you the other day.

Said he'd heard you were connected unofficially with this case. Where's Captain Paton hiding, sir, can you tell me that?"

"I doubt if it would be wise at the present juncture," said Poirot primly, and I bit my lips to prevent a smile.

The little man really did it very well.

After some further parley, we were taken to interview the prisoner.

He was a young fellow, I should say not more than twenty-two or three. Tall, thin, with slightly shaking hands, and the evidences of considerable physical strength somewhat run to seed. His hair was dark, but his eyes were blue and shifty, seldom meeting a glance squarely. I had all along cherished the illusion that there was something familiar about the figure I had met that night, but if this were indeed he, I was completely mistaken. He did not remind me in the least of any one I knew.

"Now then, Kent," said the superintendent, "stand up. Here are some visitors come to see you. Recognize any of them."

Kent glared at us sullenly, but did not reply. I saw his glance waver over the three of us, and come back to rest on me.

"Well, sir," said the superintendent to me, "what do you say?"

"The height's the same," I said, "and as far as general appearance goes it might well be the man in question. Beyond that, I couldn't go."

"What the hell's the meaning of all this?" asked Kent. "What have you got against me? Come on, out with it! What am I supposed to have done?"

I nodded my head.

"It's the man," I said. "I recognize the voice."

"Recognize my voice, do you? Where do you think you heard it before?"

"On Friday evening last, outside the gates of Fernly Park. You asked me the way there."

"I did, did I?"

"Do you admit it?" asked the inspector.

"I don't admit anything. Not till I know what you've got on me."

"Have you not read the papers in the last few days?" asked Poirot, speaking for the first time.

The man's eyes narrowed.

"So that's it, is it? I saw an old gent had been croaked at Fernly. Trying to make out I did the job, are you?"

"You were there that night," said Poirot quietly.

"How do you know, mister?"

"By this." Poirot took something from his pocket and held it out.

It was the goose quill we had found in the summer-house.

At the sight of it the man's face changed. He half held out his hand.

"Snow," said Poirot thoughtfully. "No, my friend, it is empty. It lay where you dropped it in the summer-house that night."

Charles Kent looked at him uncertainly.

"You seem to know a hell of a lot about everything, you little foreign cock duck. Perhaps you remember this: the papers say that the old gent was croaked between a quarter to ten and ten o'clock?"

"That is so," agreed Poirot.

"Yes, but is it really so? That's what I'm getting at."

"This gentleman will tell you," said Poirot.

He indicated Inspector Raglan. The latter hesitated, glanced at Superintendent Hayes, then at Poirot, and finally, as though receiving sanction, he said:—

"That's right. Between a quarter to ten and ten o'clock."

"Then you've nothing to keep me here for," said Kent. "I was away from Fernly Park by twenty-five minutes past nine. You can ask at the Dog and Whistle. That's a saloon about a mile out of Fernly on the road to Cranchester. I kicked up a bit of a row there, I remember. As near as nothing to quarter to ten, it was. How about that?"

Inspector Raglan wrote down something in his note-book.

"Well?" demanded Kent.

"Inquiries will be made," said the inspector. "If you've spoken the truth, you won't have anything to complain about. What were you doing at Fernly Park anyway?"

"Went there to meet some one."

"Who?"

"That's none of your business."

"You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, my man," the superintendent warned him.

"To hell with a civil tongue. I went there on my own business, and that's all there is to it. If I was clear away before the murder was done, that's all that concerns the cops."

"Your name, it is Charles Kent," said Poirot. "Where were you born?"

The man stared at him, then he grinned.

"I'm a full-blown Britisher all right," he said.

"Yes," said Poirot meditatively, "I think you are. I fancy you were born in Kent."

The man stared.

"Why's that? Because of my name? What's that to do with it? Is a man whose name is Kent bound to be born in that particular county?"

"Under certain circumstances, I can imagine he might be," said Poirot very deliberately. "Under certain circumstances, you comprehend."

There was so much meaning in his voice as to surprise the two police officers. As for Charles Kent, he flushed a brick red, and for a moment I

thought he was going to spring at Poirot. He thought better of it, however, and turned away with a kind of laugh.

Poirot nodded as though satisfied, and made his way out through the door. He was joined presently by the two officers.

"We'll verify that statement," remarked Raglan. "I don't think he's lying, though. But he's got to come clear with a statement as to what he was doing at Fernly. It looks to me as though we'd got our blackmailer all right. On the other hand, granted his story's correct, he couldn't have had anything to do with the actual murder. He'd got ten pounds on him when he was arrested—rather a large sum. I fancy that forty pounds went to him—the numbers of the notes didn't correspond, but of course he'd have changed them first thing. Mr. Ackroyd must have given him the money, and he made off with it as fast as possible. What was that about Kent being his birthplace? What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing whatever," said Poirot mildly. "A little idea of mine, that was all. Me, I am famous for my little ideas."

"Are you really?" said Raglan, studying him with a puzzled expression. The superintendent went into a roar of laughter.

"Many's the time I've heard Inspector Japp say that. M. Poirot and his little ideas! Too fanciful for me, he'd say, but always something in them."

"You mock yourself at me," said Poirot, smiling; "but never mind. The old ones they laugh last sometimes, when the young, clever ones do not laugh at all."

And nodding his head at them in a sage manner, he walked out into the street.

He and I lunched together at an hotel. I know now that the whole thing lay clearly unravelled before him. He had got the last thread he needed to lead him to the truth.

But at the time I had no suspicion of the fact. I overestimated his general self-confidence, and I took it for granted that the things which puzzled me must be equally puzzling to him.

My chief puzzle was what the man Charles Kent could have been doing at Fernly. Again and again I put the question to myself and could get no satisfactory reply. At last I ventured a tentative query to Poirot. His reply was immediate.

"*Mon ami*, I do not think; I know."

"Really?" I said incredulously.

"Yes, indeed. I suppose now that to you it would not make sense if I said that he went to Fernly that night because he was born in Kent?"

I stared at him.

"It certainly doesn't seem to make sense to me," I said dryly.

"Ah!" said Poirot pityingly. "Well, no matter. I have still my little idea."

CHAPTER XIX

FLORA ACKROYD

As I was returning from my round the following morning, I was hailed by Inspector Raglan. I pulled up, and the inspector mounted on the step.

"Good-morning, Dr. Sheppard," he said. "Well, that alibi is all right enough."

"Charles Kent's?"

"Charles Kent's. The barmaid at the Dog and Whistle, Sally Jones, she remembers him perfectly. Picked out his photograph from among five others. It was just a quarter to ten when he came into the bar, and the Dog and Whistle is well over a mile from Fernly Park. The girl mentions that he had a lot of money on him—she saw him take a handful of notes out of his pocket. Rather surprised her, it did, seeing the class of fellow he was, with a pair of boots clean dropping off him. That's where that forty pounds went right enough."

"The man still refuses to give an account of his visit to Fernly?"

"Obstinate as a mule he is. I had a chat with Hayes at Liverpool over the wire this morning."

"Hercule Poirot says he knows the reason the man went there that night," I observed.

"Does he?" cried the inspector eagerly.

"Yes," I said maliciously. "He says he went there because he was born in Kent."

I felt a distinct pleasure in passing on my own discomfiture.

Raglan stared at me for a moment or two uncomprehendingly. Then a grin overspread his weaselly countenance and he tapped his forehead significantly.

"Bit gone here," he said. "I've thought so for some time. Poor old chap, so that's why he had to give up and come down here. In the family, very likely. He's got a nephew who's quite off his crumpet."

"Poirot has?" I said, very surprised.

"Yes. Hasn't he ever mentioned him to you? Quite docile, I believe, and all that, but mad as a hatter, poor lad."

"Who told you that?"

Again a grin showed itself on Inspector Raglan's face.

"Your sister, Miss Sheppard, she told me all about it."

Really, Caroline is amazing. She never rests until she knows the last details of everybody's family secrets. Unfortunately, I have never been able to instill into her the decency of keeping them to herself.

"Jump in, inspector," I said, opening the door of the car. "We'll go up to

The Larches together, and acquaint our Belgian friend with the latest news."

"Might as well, I suppose. After all, even if he is a bit balmy, it was a useful tip he gave me about those fingerprints. He's got a bee in his bonnet about the man Kent, but who knows—there may be something useful behind it."

Poirot received us with his usual smiling courtesy.

He listened to the information we had brought him, nodding his head now and then.

"Seems quite O.K., doesn't it?" said the inspector rather gloomily. "A chap can't be murdering some one in one place when he's drinking in the bar in another place a mile away."

"Are you going to release him?"

"Don't see what else we can do. We can't very well hold him for obtaining money on false pretences. Can't prove a ruddy thing."

The inspector tossed a match into the grate in a disgruntled fashion. Poirot retrieved it and put it neatly in a little receptacle designed for the purpose. His action was purely mechanical. I could see that his thoughts were on something very different.

"If I were you," he said at last, "I should not release the man Charles Kent yet."

"What do you mean?"

Raglan stared at him.

"What I say. I should not release him yet."

"You don't think he can have had anything to do with the murder, do you?"

"I think probably not—but one cannot be certain yet."

"But haven't I just told you—"

Poirot raised a hand protestingly.

"*Mais oui, mais oui.* I heard. I am not deaf—nor stupid, thank the good God! But see you, you approach the matter from the wrong—the wrong—premises, is not that the word?"

The inspector stared at him heavily.

"I don't see how you make that out. Look here, we know Mr. Ackroyd was alive at a quarter to ten. You admit that, don't you?"

Poirot looked at him for a moment, then shook his head with a quick smile.

"I admit nothing that is not—*proved!*"

"Well, we've got proof enough of that. We've got Miss Flora Ackroyd's evidence."

"That she said good-night to her uncle? But me—I do not always believe what a young lady tells me—no, not even when she is charming and beautiful."

"But hang it all, man, Parker saw her coming out of the door."

"No." Poirot's voice rang out with sudden sharpness. "That is just what he did not see. I satisfied myself of that by a little experiment the other day—you remember, doctor? Parker saw her *outside* the door, with her hand on the handle. He did not see her come out of the room."

"But—where else could she have been?"

"Perhaps on the stairs."

"The stairs?"

"That is my little idea—yes."

"But those stairs only lead to Mr. Ackroyd's bedroom."

"Precisely."

And still the inspector stared.

"You think she'd been up to her uncle's bedroom? Well, why not? Why should she lie about it?"

"Ah! that is just the question. It depends on what she was doing there, does it not?"

"You mean—the money? Hang it all, you don't suggest that it was Miss Ackroyd who took that forty pounds?"

"I suggest nothing," said Poirot. "But I will remind you of this. Life was not very easy for that mother and daughter. There were bills—there was constant trouble over small sums of money. Roger Ackroyd was a peculiar man over money matters. The girl might be at her wit's end for a comparatively small sum. Figure to yourself then what happens. She has taken the money, she descends the little staircase. When she is half-way down she hears the chink of glass from the hall. She has not a doubt of what it is—Parker coming to the study. At all costs she must not be found on the stairs—Parker will not forget it, he will think it odd. If the money is missed, Parker is sure to remember having seen her come down those stairs. She has just time to rush down to the study door—with her hand on the handle to show that she has just come out, when Parker appears in the doorway. She says the first thing that comes into her head, a repetition of Roger Ackroyd's orders earlier in the evening, and then goes upstairs to her own room."

"Yes, but later," persisted the inspector, "she must have realized the vital importance of speaking the truth? Why, the whole case hinges on it!"

"Afterwards," said Poirot dryly, "it was a little difficult for Mademoiselle Flora. She is told simply that the police are here and that there has been a robbery. Naturally she jumps to the conclusion that the theft of the money has been discovered. Her one idea is to stick to her story. When she learns that her uncle is dead she is panic-stricken. Young women do not faint nowadays, monsieur, without considerable provocation. *Eh bien!* there it is. She is bound to stick to her story, or else confess everything. And a young and pretty girl does not like to admit that she is a thief—especially before those whose esteem she is anxious to retain."

Raglan brought his fist down with a thump on the table.

"I'll not believe it," he said. "It's—it's not credible. And you—you've known this all along?"

"The possibility has been in my mind from the first," admitted Poirot. "I was always convinced that Mademoiselle Flora was hiding something from us. To satisfy myself, I made the little experiment I told you of. Dr. Sheppard accompanied me."

"A test for Parker, you said it was," I remarked bitterly.

"*Mon ami*," said Poirot apologetically, "as I told you at the time, one must say something."

The inspector rose.

"There's only one thing for it," he declared. "We must tackle the young lady right away. You'll come up to Fernly with me, M. Poirot?"

"Certainly. Dr. Sheppard will drive us up in his car."

I acquiesced willingly.

On inquiry for Miss Ackroyd, we were shown into the billiard room. Flora and Major Hector Blunt were sitting on the long window seat.

"Good-morning, Miss Ackroyd," said the inspector. "Can we have a word or two alone with you?"

Blunt got up at once and moved to the door.

"What is it?" asked Flora nervously. "Don't go, Major Blunt. He can stay, can't he?" she asked, turning to the inspector.

"That's as you like," said the inspector dryly. "There's a question or two it's my duty to put to you, miss, but I'd prefer to do so privately, and I dare say you'd prefer it also."

Flora looked keenly at him. I saw her face grow whiter. Then she turned and spoke to Blunt.

"I want you to stay—please—yes, I mean it. Whatever the inspector has to say to me, I'd rather you heard it."

Raglan shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if you will have it so, that's all there is to it. Now, Miss Ackroyd, M. Poirot here has made a certain suggestion to me. He suggests that you weren't in the study at all last Friday night, that you never saw Mr. Ackroyd to say good-night to him, that instead of being in the study you were on the stairs leading down from your uncle's bedroom when you heard Parker coming across the hall."

Flora's gaze shifted to Poirot. He nodded back at her.

"Mademoiselle, the other day, when we sat round the table, I implored you to be frank with me. What one does not tell to Papa Poirot he finds out. It was that, was it not? See, I will make it easy for you. You took the money, did you not?"

"The money," said Blunt sharply.

There was a silence which lasted for at least a minute.

Then Flora drew herself up and spoke.

"M. Poirot is right. I took that money. I stole. I am a thief—yes, a common, vulgar little thief. Now you know! I am glad it has come out. It's been a nightmare, these last few days!" She sat down suddenly and buried her face in her hands. She spoke huskily through her fingers. "You don't know what my life has been since I came here. Wanting things, scheming for them, lying, cheating, running up bills, promising to pay—oh! I hate myself when I think of it all! That's what brought us together, Ralph and I. We were both weak! I understood him, and I was sorry—because I'm the same underneath. We're not strong enough to stand alone, either of us. We're weak, miserable, despicable things."

She looked at Blunt and suddenly stamped her foot.

"Why do you look at me like that—as though you couldn't believe? I may be a thief—but at any rate I'm real now. I'm not lying any more. I'm not pretending to be the kind of girl you like, young and innocent and simple. I don't care if you never want to see me again. I hate myself, despise myself—but you've got to believe one thing, if speaking the truth would have made things better for Ralph, I would have spoken out. But I've seen all along that it wouldn't be better for Ralph—it makes the case against him blacker than ever. I was not doing him any harm by sticking to my lie."

"Ralph," said Blunt. "I see—always Ralph."

"You don't understand," said Flora hopelessly. "You never will."

She turned to the inspector.

"I admit everything; I was at my wit's end for money. I never saw my uncle that evening after he left the dinner-table. As to the money, you can take what steps you please. Nothing could be worse than it is now!"

Suddenly she broke down again, hid her face in her hands, and rushed from the room.

"Well," said the inspector in a flat tone, "so that's that."

He seemed rather at a loss what to do next.

Blunt came forward.

"Inspector Raglan," he said quietly, "that money was given to me by Mr. Ackroyd for a special purpose. Miss Ackroyd never touched it. When she says she did, she is lying with the idea of shielding Captain Paton. The truth is as I said, and I am prepared to go into the witness box and swear to it."

He made a kind of jerky bow, then turning abruptly, he left the room.

Poirot was after him in a flash. He caught the other up in the hall.

"Monsieur—a moment, I beg of you, if you will be so good."

"Well, sir?"

Blunt was obviously impatient. He stood frowning down on Poirot.

"It is this," said Poirot rapidly: "I am not deceived by your little fantasy."

No, indeed. It was truly Miss Flora who took the money. All the same it is well imagined what you say—it pleases me. It is very good what you have done there. You are a man quick to think and to act.”

“I’m not in the least anxious for your opinion, thank you,” said Blunt coldly.

He made once more as though to pass on, but Poirot, not at all offended, laid a detaining hand on his arm.

“Ah! but you are to listen to me. I have more to say. The other day I spoke of concealments. Very well, all along have I seen what you are concealing. Mademoiselle Flora, you love her with all your heart. From the first moment you saw her, is it not so? Oh! let us not mind saying these things—why must one in England think it necessary to mention love as though it were some disgraceful secret? You love Mademoiselle Flora. You seek to conceal that fact from all the world. That is very good—that is as it should be. But take the advice of Hercule Poirot—do not conceal it from mademoiselle herself.”

Blunt had shown several signs of restlessness whilst Poirot was speaking, but the closing words seemed to rivet his attention.

“What d’you mean by that?” he said sharply.

“You think that she loves the Capitaine Ralph Paton—but I, Hercule Poirot, tell you that that is not so. Mademoiselle Flora accepted Captain Paton to please her uncle, and because she saw in the marriage a way of escape from her life here which was becoming frankly insupportable to her. She liked him, and there was much sympathy and understanding between them. But love—no! It is not Captain Paton Mademoiselle Flora loves.”

“What the devil do you mean?” asked Blunt.

I saw the dark flush under his tan.

“You have been blind, monsieur. Blind! She is loyal, the little one. Ralph Paton is under a cloud, she is bound in honor to stick by him.”

I felt it was time I put in a word to help on the good work.

“My sister told me the other night,” I said encouragingly, “that Flora had never cared a penny piece for Ralph Paton, and never would. My sister is always right about these things.”

Blunt ignored my well-meant efforts. He spoke to Poirot.

“D’you really think——” he began, and stopped.

He is one of those inarticulate men who find it hard to put things into words.

Poirot knows no such disability.

“If you doubt me, ask her yourself, monsieur. But perhaps you no longer care to—the affair of the money——”

Blunt gave a sound like an angry laugh.

“Think I’d hold that against her? Roger was always a queer chap about money. She got in a mess and didn’t dare tell him. Poor kid. Poor lonely kid.”

Poirot looked thoughtfully at the side door.

"Mademoiselle Flora went into the garden, I think," he murmured.

"I've been every kind of a fool," said Blunt abruptly. "Rum conversation we've been having. Like one of those Danish plays. But you're a sound fellow, M. Poirot. Thank you."

He took Poirot's hand and gave it a grip which caused the other to wince in anguish. Then he strode to the side door and passed out into the garden.

"Not every kind of a fool," murmured Poirot, tenderly nursing the injured member. "Only one kind—the fool in love."

CHAPTER XX

MISS RUSSELL

INSPECTOR RAGLAN had received a bad jolt. He was not deceived by Blunt's valiant lie any more than we had been. Our way back to the village was punctuated by his complaints.

"This alters everything, this does. I don't know whether you've realized it, Monsieur Poirot?"

"I think so, yes, I think so," said Poirot. "You see, me, I have been familiar with the idea for some time."

Inspector Raglan, who had only had the idea presented to him a short half-hour ago, looked at Poirot unhappily, and went on with his discoveries.

"Those alibis now. Worthless! Absolutely worthless. Got to start again. Find out what every one was doing from nine-thirty onwards. Nine-thirty—that's the time we've got to hang on to. You were quite right about the man Kent—we don't release *him* yet awhile. Let me see now—nine-forty-five at the Dog and Whistle. He might have got there in a quarter of an hour if he ran. It's just possible that it was *his* voice Mr. Raymond heard talking to Mr. Ackroyd—asking for money which Mr. Ackroyd refused. But one thing's clear—it wasn't he who sent the telephone message. The station is half a mile in the other direction—over a mile and a half from the Dog and Whistle, and he was at the Dog and Whistle until about ten minutes past ten. Dang that telephone call! We always come up against it."

"We do indeed," agreed Poirot. "It is curious."

"It's just possible that if Captain Paton climbed into his uncle's room and found him there murdered, *he* may have sent it. Got the wind up, thought he'd be accused, and cleared out. That's possible, isn't it?"

"Why should he have telephoned?"

"May have had doubts if the old man was really dead. Thought he'd get the doctor up there as soon as possible, but didn't want to give himself away. Yes, I say now, how's that for a theory? Something in that, I should say."

The inspector swelled his chest out importantly. He was so plainly delighted with himself that any words of ours would have been quite superfluous.

We arrived back at my house at this minute, and I hurried in to my surgery patients, who had all been waiting a considerable time, leaving Poirot to walk to the police station with the inspector.

Having dismissed the last patient, I strolled into the little room at the back of the house which I call my workshop—I am rather proud of the home-made wireless set I turned out. Caroline hates my workroom. I keep my tools there, and Annie is not allowed to wreak havoc with a dustpan and brush. I was just adjusting the interior of an alarm clock which had been denounced as wholly unreliable by the household, when the door opened and Caroline put her head in.

"Oh! there you are, James," she said, with deep disapproval. "M. Poirot wants to see you."

"Well," I said, rather irritably, for her sudden entrance had startled me and I had let go of a piece of delicate mechanism, "if he wants to see me, he can come in here."

"In here?" said Caroline.

"That's what I said—in here."

Caroline gave a sniff of disapproval and retired. She returned in a moment or two, ushering in Poirot, and then retired again, shutting the door with a bang.

"Aha! my friend," said Poirot, coming forward and rubbing his hands. "You have not got rid of me so easily, you see!"

"Finished with the inspector?" I asked.

"For the moment, yes. And you, you have seen all the patients?"

"Yes."

Poirot sat down and looked at me, tilting his egg-shaped head on one side, with the air of one who savors a very delicious joke.

"You are in error," he said at last. "You have still one patient to see."

"Not you?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Ah, not me, *bien entendu*. Me, I have the health magnificent. No, to tell you the truth, it is a little *complot* of mine. There is some one I wish to see, you understand—and at the same time it is not necessary that the whole village should intrigue itself about the matter—which is what would happen if the lady were seen to come to my house—for it is a lady. But to you she has already come as a patient before."

"Miss Russell!" I exclaimed.

"*Précisément*. I wish much to speak with her, so I send her the little note and make the appointment in your surgery. You are not annoyed with me?"

"On the contrary," I said. "That is, presuming I am allowed to be present at the interview?"

"But naturally! In your own surgery!"

"You know," I said, throwing down the pincers I was holding, "it's extraordinarily intriguing, the whole thing. Every new development that arises is like the shake you give to a kaleidoscope—the thing changes entirely in aspect. Now, why are you so anxious to see Miss Russell?"

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"Surely it is obvious?" he murmured.

"There you go again," I grumbled. "According to you everything is obvious. But you leave me walking about in a fog."

Poirot shook his head genially at me.

"You mock yourself at me. Take the matter of Mademoiselle Flora. The inspector was surprised—but you—you were not."

"I never dreamed of her being the thief," I expostulated.

"That—perhaps no. But I was watching your face and you were not—like Inspector Raglan—startled and incredulous."

I thought for a minute or two.

"Perhaps you are right," I said at last. "All along I've felt that Flora was keeping back something—so the truth, when it came, was subconsciously expected. It upset Inspector Raglan very much indeed, poor man."

"Ah! *pour ça, ouï!* The poor man must rearrange all his ideas. I profited by his state of mental chaos to induce him to grant me a little favor."

"What was that?"

Poirot took a sheet of notepaper from his pocket. Some words were written on it, and he read them aloud.

"The police have, for some days been seeking for Captain Ralph Paton, the stepson of Mr. Ackroyd of Fernly Park, whose death occurred under such tragic circumstances last Friday. Captain Paton has been found at Liverpool, where he was on the point of embarking for America."

He folded up the piece of paper again.

"That, my friend, will be in the newspapers to-morrow morning."

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

"But—but it isn't true! He's not at Liverpool!"

Poirot beamed on me.

"You have the intelligence so quick! No, he has not been found at Liverpool. Inspector Raglan was very loath to let me send this paragraph to the press, especially as I could not take him into my confidence. But I assured him most solemnly that very interesting results would follow its appearance in print, so he gave in, after stipulating that he was, on no account, to bear the responsibility."

I stared at Poirot. He smiled back at me.

"It beats me," I said at last, "what you expect to get out of that."

"You should employ your little gray cells," said Poirot gravely.

He rose and came across to the bench.

"It is that you have really the love of the machinery," he said, after inspecting the débris of my labors.

Every man has his hobby. I immediately drew Poirot's attention to my home-made wireless. Finding him sympathetic, I showed him one or two little inventions of my own—trifling things, but useful in the house.

"Decidedly," said Poirot, "you should be an inventor by trade, not a doctor. But I hear the bell—that is your patient. Let us go into the surgery."

Once before I had been struck by the remnants of beauty in the house-keeper's face. This morning I was struck anew. Very simply dressed in black, tall, upright and independent as ever, with her big dark eyes and an unwonted flush of color in her usually pale cheeks, I realized that as a girl she must have been startlingly handsome.

"Good-morning, mademoiselle," said Poirot. "Will you be seated? Dr. Sheppard is so kind as to permit me the use of his surgery for a little conversation I am anxious to have with you."

Miss Russell sat down with her usual composure. If she felt any inward agitation, it did not display itself in any outward manifestation.

"It seems a queer way of doing things, if you'll allow me to say so," she remarked.

"Miss Russell—I have news to give you."

"Indeed!"

"Charles Kent has been arrested at Liverpool."

Not a muscle of her face moved. She merely opened her eyes a trifle wider, and asked, with a tinge of defiance:

"Well, what of it?"

But at that moment it came to me—the resemblance that had haunted me all along, something familiar in the defiance of Charles Kent's manner. The two voices, one rough and coarse, the other painfully ladylike—were strangely the same in timbre. It was of Miss Russell that I had been reminded that night outside the gates of Fernly Park.

I looked at Poirot, full of my discovery, and he gave me an imperceptible nod.

In answer to Miss Russell's question, he threw out his hands in a thoroughly French gesture.

"I thought you might be interested, that is all," he said mildly.

"Well, I'm not particularly," said Miss Russell. "Who is this Charles Kent anyway?"

"He is a man, mademoiselle, who was at Fernly on the night of the murder."

"Really?"

"Fortunately for him, he has an alibi. At a quarter to ten he was at a public-house a mile from here."

"Lucky for him," commented Miss Russell.

"But we still do not know what he was doing at Fernly—who it was he went to meet, for instance."

"I'm afraid I can't help you at all," said the housekeeper politely. "Nothing came to *my* ears. If that is all——"

She made a tentative movement as though to rise. Poirot stopped her.

"It is not quite all," he said smoothly. "This morning fresh developments have arisen. It seems now that Mr. Ackroyd was murdered, not at a quarter to ten, but *before*. Between ten minutes to nine, when Dr. Sheppard left, and a quarter to ten."

I saw the color drain from the housekeeper's face, leaving it dead white. She leaned forward, her figure swaying.

"But Miss Ackroyd said—Miss Ackroyd said——"

"Miss Ackroyd has admitted that she was lying. She was never in the study at all that evening."

"Then——?"

"Then it would seem that in this Charles Kent we have the man we are looking for. He came to Fernly, can give no account of what he was doing there——"

"I can tell you what he was doing there. He never touched a hair of old Ackroyd's head—he never went near the study. He didn't do it, I tell you."

She was leaning forward. That iron self-control was broken through at last. Terror and desperation were in her face.

"M. Poirot! M. Poirot! Oh, do believe me."

Poirot got up and came to her. He patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.

"But yes—but yes, I will believe. I had to make you speak, you know."

For an instant suspicion flared up in her.

"Is what you said true?"

"That Charles Kent is suspected of the crime? Yes, that is true. You alone can save him, by telling the reason for his being at Fernly."

"He came to see me." She spoke in a low, hurried voice. "I went out to meet him——"

"In the summer-house, yes, I know."

"How do you know?"

"Mademoiselle, it is the business of Hercule Poirot to know things. I know that you went out earlier in the evening, that you left a message in the summer-house to say what time you would be there."

"Yes, I did. I had heard from him—saying he was coming. I dared not let him come to the house. I wrote to the address he gave me and said I would

meet him in the summer-house, and described it to him so that he would be able to find it. Then I was afraid he might not wait there patiently, and I ran out and left a piece of paper to say I would be there about ten minutes past nine. I didn't want the servants to see me, so I slipped out through the drawing-room window. As I came back, I met Dr. Sheppard, and I fancied that he would think it queer. I was out of breath, for I had been running. I had no idea that he was expected to dinner that night."

She paused.

"Go on," said Poirot. "You went out to meet him at ten minutes past nine. What did you say to each other?"

"It's difficult. You see—"

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, interrupting her, "in this matter I must have the whole truth. What you tell us need never go beyond these four walls. Dr. Sheppard will be discreet, and so shall I. See, I will help you. This Charles Kent, he is your son, is he not?"

She nodded. The color had flamed into her cheeks.

"No one has ever known. It was long ago—long ago—down in Kent. I was not married. . . ."

"So you took the name of the county as a surname for him. I understand."

"I got work. I managed to pay for his board and lodging. I never told him that I was his mother. But he turned out badly, he drank, then took to drugs. I managed to pay his passage out to Canada. I didn't hear of him for a year or two. Then, somehow or other, he found out that I was his mother. He wrote asking me for money. Finally, I heard from him back in this country again. He was coming to see me at Fernly, he said. I dared not let him come to the house. I have always been considered so—so very respectable. If any one got an inkling—it would have been all up with my post as housekeeper. So I wrote to him in the way I have just told you."

"And in the morning you came to see Dr. Sheppard?"

"Yes. I wondered if something could be done. He was not a bad boy—before he took to drugs."

"I see," said Poirot. "Now let us go on with the story. He came that night to the summer-house?"

"Yes, he was waiting for me when I got there. He was very rough and abusive. I had brought with me all the money I had, and I gave it to him. We talked a little, and then he went away."

"What time was that?"

"It must have been between twenty and twenty-five minutes past nine. It was not yet half-past when I got back to the house."

"Which way did he go?"

"Straight out the same way he came, by the path that joined the drive just inside the lodge gates."

Poirot nodded.

"And you, what did you do?"

"I went back to the house. Major Blunt was walking up and down the terrace smoking, so I made a detour to get round to the side door. It was then just on half-past nine, as I tell you."

Poirot nodded again. He made a note or two in a microscopic note-book.

"I think that is all," he said thoughtfully.

"Ought I—" she hesitated. "Ought I to tell all this to Inspector Raglan?"

"It may come to that. But let us not be in a hurry. Let us proceed slowly, with due order and method. Charles Kent is not yet formally charged with murder. Circumstances may arise which will render your story unnecessary."

Miss Russell rose.

"Thank you very much, M. Poirot," she said. "You have been very kind—very kind indeed. You—you do believe me, don't you? That Charles had nothing to do with this wicked murder!"

"There seems no doubt that the man who was talking to Mr. Ackroyd in the library at nine-thirty could not possibly have been your son. Be of good courage, mademoiselle. All will yet be well."

Miss Russell departed. Poirot and I were left together.

"So that's that," I said. "Every time we come back to Ralph Paton. How did you manage to spot Miss Russell as the person Charles Kent came to meet? Did you notice the resemblance?"

"I had connected her with the unknown man long before we actually came face to face with him. As soon as we found that quill. The quill suggested dope, and I remembered your account of Miss Russell's visit to you. Then I found the article on cocaine in that morning's paper. It all seemed very clear. She had heard from some one that morning—some one addicted to drugs, she read the article in the paper, and she came to you to ask a few tentative questions. She mentioned cocaine, since the article in question was on cocaine. Then, when you seemed too interested, she switched hurriedly to the subject of detective stories and untraceable poisons. I suspected a son or a brother, or some other undesirable male relation. Ah! but I must go. It is the time of the lunch."

"Stay and lunch with us," I suggested.

Poirot shook his head. A faint twinkle came into his eye.

"Not again to-day. I should not like to force Mademoiselle Caroline to adopt a vegetarian diet two days in succession."

It occurred to me that there was not much which escaped Hercule Poirot.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PARAGRAPH IN THE PAPER

CAROLINE, of course, had not failed to see Miss Russell come to the surgery door. I had anticipated this, and had ready an elaborate account of the lady's bad knee. But Caroline was not in a cross-questioning mood. Her point of view was that she knew what Miss Russell had really come for and that I didn't.

"Pumping you, James," said Caroline. "Pumping you in the most shameless manner, I've not a doubt. It's no good interrupting. I dare say you hadn't the least idea she was doing it even. Men *are* so simple. She knows that you are in M. Poirot's confidence, and she wants to find out things. Do you know what I think, James?"

"I couldn't begin to imagine. You think so many extraordinary things."

"It's no good being sarcastic. I think Miss Russell knows more about Mr. Ackroyd's death than she is prepared to admit."

Caroline leaned back triumphantly in her chair.

"Do you really think so?" I said absently.

"You are very dull to-day, James. No animation about you. It's that liver of yours."

Our conversation then dealt with purely personal matters.

The paragraph inspired by Poirot duly appeared in our daily paper the next morning. I was in the dark as to its purpose, but its effect on Caroline was immense.

She began by stating, most untruly, that she had said as much all along. I raised my eyebrows, but did not argue. Caroline, however, must have felt a prick of conscience, for she went on:—

"I mayn't have actually mentioned Liverpool, but I knew he'd try to get away to America. That's what Crippen did."

"Without much success," I reminded her.

"Poor boy, and so they've caught him. I consider, James, that it's your duty to see that he isn't hung."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Why, you're a medical man, aren't you? You've known him from a boy upwards. Not mentally responsible. That's the line to take, clearly. I read only the other day that they're very happy in Broadmoor—it's quite like a high-class club."

But Caroline's words had reminded me of something.

"I never knew that Poirot had an imbecile nephew?" I said curiously.

"Didn't you? Oh, he told me all about it. Poor lad. It's a great grief to

all the family. They've kept him at home so far, but it's getting to such a pitch that they're afraid he'll have to go into some kind of institution."

"I suppose you know pretty well everything there is to know about Poirot's family by this time," I said, exasperated.

"Pretty well," said Caroline complacently. "It's a great relief to people to be able to tell all their troubles to some one."

"It might be," I said, "if they were ever allowed to do so spontaneously. Whether they enjoy having confidences screwed out of them by force is another matter."

Caroline merely looked at me with the air of a Christian martyr enjoying martyrdom.

"You are so self-contained, James," she said. "You hate speaking out, or parting with any information yourself, and you think everybody else must be just like you. I should hope that I never screw confidences out of anybody. For instance, if M. Poirot comes in this afternoon, as he said he might do, I shall not dream of asking him who it was arrived at his house early this morning."

"Early this morning?" I queried.

"Very early," said Caroline. "Before the milk came. I just happened to be looking out of the window—the blind was flapping. It was a man. He came in a closed car, and he was all muffled up. I couldn't get a glimpse of his face. But I will tell you *my* idea, and you'll see that I'm right."

"What's your idea?"

Caroline dropped her voice mysteriously.

"A Home Office expert," she breathed.

"A Home Office expert," I said, amazed. "My dear Caroline!"

"Mark my words, James, you'll see that I'm right. That Russell woman was here that morning after your poisons. Roger Ackroyd might easily have been poisoned in his food that night."

I laughed out loud.

"Nonsense," I cried. "He was stabbed in the neck. You know that as well as I do."

"After death, James," said Caroline; "to make a false clew."

"My good woman," I said, "I examined the body, and I know what I'm talking about. That wound wasn't inflicted after death—it was the cause of death, and you need make no mistake about it."

Caroline merely continued to look omniscient, which so annoyed me that I went on:—

"Perhaps you will tell me, Caroline, if I have a medical degree or if I have not?"

"You have the medical degree, I dare say, James—at least, I mean I know you have. But you've no imagination whatever."

"Having endowed you with a treble portion, there was none left over for me," I said dryly.

I was amused to notice Caroline's maneuvers that afternoon when Poirot duly arrived. My sister, without asking a direct question, skirted the subject of the mysterious guest in every way imaginable. By the twinkle in Poirot's eyes, I saw that he realized her object. He remained blandly impervious, and blocked her bowling so successfully that she herself was at a loss how to proceed.

Having, I suspect, quietly enjoyed the little game, he rose to his feet and suggested a walk.

"It is that I need to reduce the figure a little," he explained. "You will come with me, doctor? And perhaps later Miss Caroline will give us some tea."

"Delighted," said Caroline. "Won't your—er—guest come in also?"

"You are too kind," said Poirot. "But no, my friend reposes himself. Soon you must make his acquaintance."

"Quite an old friend of yours, so somebody told me," said Caroline, making one last valiant effort.

"Did they?" murmured Poirot. "Well, we must start."

Our tramp took us in the direction of Fernly. I had guessed beforehand that it might do so. I was beginning to understand Poirot's methods. Every little irrelevancy had a bearing upon the whole.

"I have a commission for you, my friend," he said at last. "To-night, at my house, I desire to have a little conference. You will attend, will you not?"

"Certainly," I said.

"Good. I need also all those in the house—that is to say: Mrs. Ackroyd, Mademoiselle Flora, Major Blunt, M. Raymond. I want you to be my ambassador. This little reunion is fixed for nine o'clock. You will ask them—yes?"

"With pleasure; but why not ask them yourself?"

"Because they will then put the questions: Why? What for? They will demand what my idea is. And, as you know, my friend, I much dislike to have to explain my little ideas until the time comes."

I smiled a little.

"My friend Hastings, he of whom I told you, used to say of me that I was the human oyster. But he was unjust. Of facts, I keep nothing to myself. But to every one his own interpretation of them."

"When do you want me to do this?"

"Now, if you will. We are close to the house."

"Aren't you coming in?"

"No, me, I will promenade myself in the grounds. I will rejoin you by the lodge gates in a quarter of an hour's time."

I nodded, and set off on my task. The only member of the family at home

proved to be Mrs. Ackroyd, who was sipping an early cup of tea. She received me very graciously.

"So grateful to you, doctor," she murmured, "for clearing up that little matter with M. Poirot. But life is one trouble after another. You have heard about Flora, of course?"

"What exactly?" I asked cautiously.

"This new engagement. Flora and Hector Blunt. Of course not such a good match as Ralph would have been. But after all, happiness comes first. What dear Flora needs is an older man—some one steady and reliable, and then Hector is really a very distinguished man in his way. You saw the news of Ralph's arrest in the paper this morning?"

"Yes," I said, "I did."

"Horrible." Mrs. Ackroyd closed her eyes and shuddered. "Geoffrey Raymond was in a terrible way. Rang up Liverpool. But they wouldn't tell him anything at the police station there. In fact, they said they hadn't arrested Ralph at all. Mr. Raymond insists that it's all a mistake—a—what do they call it?—*canard* of the newspaper's. I've forbidden it to be mentioned before the servants. Such a terrible disgrace. Fancy if Flora had actually been married to him."

Mrs. Ackroyd shut her eyes in anguish. I began to wonder how soon I should be able to deliver Poirot's invitation.

Before I had time to speak, Mrs. Ackroyd was off again.

"You were here yesterday, weren't you, with that dreadful Inspector Raglan? Brute of a man—he terrified Flora into saying she took that money from poor Roger's room. And the matter was so simple, really. The dear child wanted to borrow a few pounds, didn't like to disturb her uncle since he'd given strict orders against it, but knowing where he kept his notes she went there and took what she needed."

"Is that Flora's account of the matter?" I asked.

"My dear doctor, you know what girls are nowadays. So easily acted on by suggestion. You, of course, know all about hypnosis and that sort of thing. The inspector shouts at her, says the word 'steal' over and over again, until the poor child gets an inhibition—or is it a complex?—I always mix up those two words—and actually thinks herself that she has stolen the money. I saw at once how it was. But I can't be too thankful for the whole misunderstanding in one way—it seems to have brought those two together—Hector and Flora, I mean. And I assure you that I have been very much worried about Flora in the past: why, at one time I actually thought there was going to be some kind of understanding between her and young Raymond. Just think of it!" Mrs. Ackroyd's voice rose in shrill horror. "A private secretary—with practically no means of his own."

"It would have been a severe blow to you," I said. "Now, Mrs. Ackroyd, I've got a message for you from M. Hercule Poirot."

"For me?"

Mrs. Ackroyd looked quite alarmed.

I hastened to reassure her, and I explained what Poirot wanted.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Ackroyd rather doubtfully, "I suppose we must come if M. Poirot says so. But what is it all about? I like to know beforehand."

I assured the lady truthfully that I myself did not know any more than she did.

"Very well," said Mrs. Ackroyd at last, rather grudgingly, "I will tell the others, and we will be there at nine o'clock."

Thereupon I took my leave, and joined Poirot at the agreed meeting-place.

"I've been longer than a quarter of an hour, I'm afraid," I remarked. "But once that good lady starts talking it's a matter of the utmost difficulty to get a word in edgeways."

"It is of no matter," said Poirot. "Me, I have been well amused. This park is magnificent."

We set off homewards. When we arrived, to our great surprise Caroline, who had evidently been watching for us, herself opened the door.

She put her fingers to her lips. Her face was full of importance and excitement.

"Ursula Bourne," she said, "the parlormaid from Fernly. She's here! I've put her in the dining-room. She's in a terrible way, poor thing. Says she must see M. Poirot at once. I've done all I could. Taken her a cup of hot tea. It really goes to one's heart to see any one in such a state."

"In the dining-room?" asked Poirot.

"This way," I said, and flung open the door.

Ursula Bourne was sitting by the table. Her arms were spread out in front of her, and she had evidently just lifted her head from where it had been buried. Her eyes were red with weeping.

"Ursula Bourne," I murmured.

But Poirot went past me with outstretched hands.

"No," he said, "that is not quite right, I think. It is not Ursula Bourne, is it, my child—but Ursula Paton? Mrs. Ralph Paton."

CHAPTER XXII

URSULA'S STORY

FOR A MOMENT or two the girl looked mutely at Poirot. Then, her reserve breaking down completely, she nodded her head once, and burst into an outburst of sobs.

Caroline pushed past me, and putting her arm round the girl, patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there, my dear," she said soothingly, "it will be all right. You'll see—everything will be all right."

Buried under curiosity and scandal-mongering there is a lot of kindness in Caroline. For the moment, even the interest of Poirot's revelation was lost in the sight of the girl's distress.

Presently Ursula sat up and wiped her eyes.

"This is very weak and silly of me," she said.

"No, no, my child," said Poirot kindly. "We can all realize the strain of this last week."

"It must have been a terrible ordeal," I said.

"And then to find that you knew," continued Ursula. "How did you know? Was it Ralph who told you?"

Poirot shook his head.

"You know what brought me to you to-night," went on the girl. "*This—*"

She held out a crumpled piece of newspaper, and I recognized the paragraph that Poirot had had inserted.

"It says that Ralph has been arrested. So everything is useless. I need not pretend any longer."

"Newspaper paragraphs are not always true, mademoiselle," murmured Poirot, having the grace to look ashamed of himself. "All the same, I think you will do well to make a clean breast of things. The truth is what we need now."

The girl hesitated, looking at him doubtfully.

"You do not trust me," said Poirot gently. "Yet all the same you came here to find me, did you not? Why was that?"

"Because I don't believe that Ralph did it," said the girl in a very low voice. "And I think that you are clever, and will find out the truth. And also—"

"Yes?"

"I think you are kind."

Poirot nodded his head several times.

"It is very good that—yes, it is very good. Listen, I do in verity believe that this husband of yours is innocent—but the affair marches badly. If I am to save him, I must know all there is to know—even if it should seem to make the case against him blacker than before."

"How well you understand," said Ursula.

"So you will tell me the whole story, will you not? From the beginning."

"You're not going to send *me* away, I hope," said Caroline, settling herself comfortably in an arm-chair. "What I want to know," she continued, "is why this child was masquerading as a parlormaid?"

"Masquerading?" I queried.

"That's what I said. Why did you do it, child? For a wager?"

"For a living," said Ursula dryly.

And encouraged, she began the story which I reproduce here in my own words.

Ursula Bourne, it seemed, was one of a family of seven—impoverished Irish gentlefolk. On the death of her father, most of the girls were cast out into the world to earn their own living. Ursula's eldest sister was married to Captain Folliott. It was she whom I had seen that Sunday, and the cause of her embarrassment was clear enough now. Determined to earn her living and not attracted to the idea of being a nursery governess—the one profession open to an untrained girl, Ursula preferred the job of parlormaid. She scorned to label herself a "lady parlormaid." She would be the real thing, her reference being supplied by her sister. At Fernly, despite an aloofness which, as has been seen, caused some comment, she was a success at her job—quick, competent, and thorough.

"I enjoyed the work," she explained. "And I had plenty of time to myself."

And then came her meeting with Ralph Paton, and the love affair which culminated in a secret marriage. Ralph had persuaded her into that, somewhat against her will. He had declared that his stepfather would not hear of his marrying a penniless girl. Better to be married secretly, and break the news to him at some later and more favorable minute.

And so the deed was done, and Ursula Bourne became Ursula Paton. Ralph had declared that he meant to pay off his debts, find a job, and then, when he was in a position to support her, and independent of his adopted father, they would break the news to him.

But to people like Ralph Paton, turning over a new leaf is easier in theory than in practice. He hoped that his stepfather, whilst still in ignorance of the marriage, might be persuaded to pay his debts and put him on his feet again. But the revelation of the amount of Ralph's liabilities merely enraged Roger Ackroyd, and he refused to do anything at all. Some months passed, and then Ralph was bidden once more to Fernly. Roger Ackroyd did not beat about the bush. It was the desire of his heart that Ralph should marry Flora, and he put the matter plainly before the young man.

And here it was that the innate weakness of Ralph Paton showed itself. As always, he grasped at the easy, the immediate solution. As far as I could make out, neither Flora nor Ralph made any pretence of love. It was, on both sides, a business arrangement. Roger Ackroyd dictated his wishes—they agreed to them. Flora accepted a chance of liberty, money, and an enlarged horizon; Ralph, of course, was playing a different game. But he was in a very awkward hole financially. He seized at the chance. His debts would be paid. He could start again with a clean sheet. His was not a nature to envisage the future, but I gather that he saw vaguely the engagement with Flora being

broken off after a decent interval had elapsed. Both Flora and he stipulated that it should be kept a secret for the present. He was anxious to conceal it from Ursula. He felt instinctively that her nature, strong and resolute, with an inherent distaste for duplicity, was not one to welcome such a course.

Then came the crucial moment when Roger Ackroyd, always high-handed, decided to announce the engagement. He said no word of his intention to Ralph—only to Flora, and Flora, apathetic, raised no objection. On Ursula, the news fell like a bombshell. Summoned by her, Ralph came hurriedly down from town. They met in the wood, where part of their conversation was overheard by my sister. Ralph implored her to keep silent for a little while longer, Ursula was equally determined to have done with concealments. She would tell Mr. Ackroyd the truth without any further delay. Husband and wife parted acrimoniously.

Ursula, steadfast in her purpose, sought an interview with Roger Ackroyd that very afternoon, and revealed the truth to him. Their interview was a stormy one—it might have been even more stormy had not Roger Ackroyd been already obsessed with his own troubles. It was bad enough, however. Ackroyd was not the kind of man to forgive the deceit that had been practiced upon him. His rancor was mainly directed to Ralph, but Ursula came in for her share, since he regarded her as a girl who had deliberately tried to “entrap” the adopted son of a very wealthy man. Unforgivable things were said on both sides.

That same evening Ursula met Ralph by appointment in the small summer-house, stealing out from the house by the side door in order to do so. Their interview was made up of reproaches on both sides. Ralph charged Ursula with having irretrievably ruined his prospects by her ill-timed revelation. Ursula reproached Ralph with his duplicity.

They parted at last. A little over half an hour later came the discovery of Roger Ackroyd’s body. Since that night Ursula had neither seen nor heard from Ralph.

As the story unfolded itself, I realized more and more what a damning series of facts it was. Alive, Ackroyd could hardly have failed to alter his will—I knew him well enough to realize that to do so would be his first thought. His death came in the nick of time for Ralph and Ursula Paton. Small wonder the girl had held her tongue, and played her part so consistently.

My meditations were interrupted. It was Poirot’s voice speaking, and I knew from the gravity of his tone that he, too, was fully alive to the implications of the position.

“Mademoiselle, I must ask you one question, and you must answer it truthfully, for on it everything may hang: What time was it when you parted from

Captain Ralph Paton in the summer-house? Now, take a little minute so that your answer may be very exact."

The girl gave a half laugh, bitter enough in all conscience.

"Do you think I haven't gone over that again and again in my own mind? It was just half-past nine when I went out to meet him. Major Blunt was walking up and down the terrace, so I had to go round through the bushes to avoid him. It must have been about twenty-seven minutes to ten when I reached the summer-house. Ralph was waiting for me. I was with him ten minutes—not longer, for it was just a quarter to ten when I got back to the house."

I saw now the insistence of her question the other day. If only Ackroyd could have been proved to have been killed before a quarter to ten, and not after.

I saw the reflection of that thought in Poirot's next question.

"Who left the summer-house first?"

"I did."

"Leaving Ralph Paton in the summer-house?"

"Yes—but you don't think—"

"Mademoiselle, it is of no importance what I think. What did you do when you got back to the house?"

"I went up to my room."

"And stayed there until when?"

"Until about ten o'clock."

"Is there any one who can prove that?"

"Prove? That I was in my room, you mean? Oh! no. But surely—oh! I see, they might think—they might think—"

I saw the dawning horror in her eyes.

Poirot finished the sentence for her.

"That it was *you* who entered by the window and stabbed Mr. Ackroyd as he sat in his chair? Yes, they might think just that."

"Nobody but a fool would think any such thing," said Caroline indignantly.

She patted Ursula on the shoulder.

The girl had her face hidden in her hands.

"Horrible," she was murmuring. "Horrible."

Caroline gave her a friendly shake.

"Don't worry, my dear," she said. "M. Poirot doesn't think that really. As for that husband of yours, I don't think much of him, and I tell you so candidly. Running away and leaving you to face the music."

But Ursula shook her head energetically.

"Oh, no," she cried. "It wasn't like that at all. Ralph would not run away

on his own account. I see now. If he heard of his stepfather's murder, he might think himself that I had done it."

"He wouldn't think any such thing," said Caroline.

"I was so cruel to him that night—so hard and bitter. I wouldn't listen to what he was trying to say—wouldn't believe that he really cared. I just stood there telling him what I thought of him, and saying the coldest, cruellest things that came into my mind—trying my best to hurt him."

"Do him no harm," said Caroline. "Never worry about what you say to a man. They're so conceited that they never believe you mean it if it's unflattering."

Ursula went on, nervously twisting and untwisting her hands.

"When the murder was discovered and he didn't come forward, I was terribly upset. Just for a moment I wondered—but then I knew he couldn't—he couldn't. . . . But I wished he would come forward and say openly that he'd had nothing to do with it. I knew that he was very fond of Dr. Sheppard, and I fancied that perhaps Dr. Sheppard might know where he was hiding."

She turned to me.

"That's why I said what I did to you that day. I thought, if you knew where he was, you might pass on the message to him."

"I?" I exclaimed.

"Why should James know where he was?" demanded Caroline sharply.

"It was very unlikely, I know," admitted Ursula, "but Ralph had often spoken of Dr. Sheppard, and I knew that he would be likely to consider him as his best friend in King's Abbot."

"My dear child," I said, "I have not the least idea where Ralph Paton is at the present moment."

"That is true enough," said Poirot.

"But—" Ursula held out the newspaper cutting in a puzzled fashion.

"Ah! that," said Poirot, slightly embarrassed; "*a bagatelle*, mademoiselle. *A rien du tout*. Not for a moment do I believe that Ralph Paton has been arrested."

"But then—" began the girl slowly.

Poirot went on quickly:—

"There is one thing I should like to know—did Captain Paton wear shoes or boots that night?"

Ursula shook her head.

"I can't remember."

"A pity! But how should you? Now, madame," he smiled at her, his head on one side, his forefinger wagging eloquently, "no questions. And do not torment yourself. Be of good courage, and place your faith in Hercule Poirot."

CHAPTER XXIII

POIROT'S LITTLE REUNION

"AND NOW," said Caroline, rising, "that child is coming upstairs to lie down. Don't you worry, my dear. M. Poirot will do everything he can for you—be sure of that."

"I ought to go back to Fernly," said Ursula uncertainly.

But Caroline silenced her protests with a firm hand.

"Nonsense. You're in my hands for the time being. You'll stay here for the present, anyway—eh, M. Poirot?"

"It will be the best plan," agreed the little Belgian. "This evening I shall want mademoiselle—I beg her pardon, madame—to attend my little reunion. Nine o'clock at my house. It is most necessary that she should be there."

Caroline nodded, and went with Ursula out of the room. The door shut behind them. Poirot dropped down into a chair again.

"So far, so good," he said. "Things are straightening themselves out."

"They're getting to look blacker and blacker against Ralph Paton," I observed gloomily.

Poirot nodded.

"Yes, that is so. But it was to be expected, was it not?"

I looked at him, slightly puzzled by the remark. He was leaning back in the chair, his eyes half closed, the tips of his fingers just touching each other. Suddenly he sighed and shook his head.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It is that there are moments when a great longing for my friend Hastings comes over me. That is the friend of whom I spoke to you—the one who resides now in the Argentine. Always, when I have had a big case, he has been by my side. And he has helped me—yes, often he has helped me. For he had a knack, that one, of stumbling over the truth unawares—without noticing it himself, *bien entendu*. At times he has said something particularly foolish, and behold that foolish remark has revealed the truth to me! And then, too, it was his practice to keep a written record of the cases that proved interesting."

I gave a slight embarrassed cough.

"As far as that goes," I began, and then stopped.

Poirot sat upright in his chair. His eyes sparkled.

"But yes? What is it that you would say?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've read some of Captain Hastings's narratives, and I thought, why not try my hand at something of the same kind? Seemed a pity not to—unique opportunity—probably the only time I'll be mixed up with anything of this kind."

I felt myself getting hotter and hotter, and more and more incoherent, as I floundered through the above speech.

Poirot sprang from his chair. I had a moment's terror that he was going to embrace me French fashion, but mercifully he refrained.

"But this is magnificent—you have then written down your impressions of the case as you went along?"

I nodded.

"*Epatant!*" cried Poirot. "Let me see them—this instant."

I was not quite prepared for such a sudden demand. I racked my brains to remember certain details.

"I hope you won't mind," I stammered. "I may have been a little—er—*personal* now and then."

"Oh! I comprehend perfectly; you have referred to me as comic—as, perhaps, ridiculous now and then? It matters not at all. Hastings, he also was not always polite. Me, I have the mind above such trivialities."

Still somewhat doubtful, I rummaged in the drawers of my desk and produced an untidy pile of manuscript which I handed over to him. With an eye on possible publication in the future, I had divided the work into chapters, and the night before I had brought it up to date with an account of Miss Russell's visit. Poirot had therefore twenty chapters.

I left him with them.

I was obliged to go out to a case at some distance away, and it was past eight o'clock when I got back, to be greeted with a plate of hot dinner on a tray, and the announcement that Poirot and my sister had supped together at half-past seven, and that the former had then gone to my workshop to finish his reading of the manuscript.

"I hope, James," said my sister, "that you've been careful in what you say about me in it?"

My jaw dropped. I had not been careful at all.

"Not that it matters very much," said Caroline, reading my expression correctly. "M. Poirot will know what to think. He understands me much better than you do."

I went into the workshop. Poirot was sitting by the window. The manuscript lay neatly piled on a chair beside him. He laid his hand on it and spoke.

"*Eh bien,*" he said, "I congratulate you—on your modesty!"

"Oh!" I said, rather taken aback.

"And on your reticence," he added.

I said "Oh!" again.

"Not so did Hastings write," continued my friend. "On every page, many, many times was the word 'I.' What *he* thought—what *he* did. But you—you

have kept your personality in the background; only once or twice does it obtrude—in scenes of home life, shall we say?”

I blushed a little before the twinkle in his eye.

“What do you really think of the stuff?” I asked nervously.

“You want my candid opinion?”

“Yes.”

Poirot laid his jesting manner aside.

“A very meticulous and accurate account,” he said kindly. “You have recorded all the facts faithfully and exactly—though you have shown yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them.”

“And it has helped you?”

“Yes. I may say that it has helped me considerably. Come, we must go over to my house and set the stage for my little performance.”

Caroline was in the hall. I think she hoped that she might be invited to accompany us. Poirot dealt with the situation tactfully.

“I should much like to have had you present, mademoiselle,” he said regretfully, “but at this juncture it would not be wise. See you, all these people to-night are suspects. Amongst them, I shall find the person who killed Mr. Ackroyd.”

“You really believe that?” I said incredulously.

“I see that you do not,” said Poirot dryly. “Not yet do you appreciate Hercule Poirot at his true worth.”

At that minute Ursula came down the staircase.

“You are ready, my child?” said Poirot. “That is good. We will go to my house together. Mademoiselle Caroline, believe me, I do everything possible to render you service. Good-evening.”

We went out, leaving Caroline, rather like a dog who has been refused a walk, standing on the front door step gazing after us.

The sitting-room at The Larches had been got ready. On the table were various *sirops* and glasses. Also a plate of biscuits. Several chairs had been brought in from the other room.

Poirot ran to and fro rearranging things. Pulling out a chair here, altering the position of a lamp there, occasionally stooping to straighten one of the mats that covered the floor. He was specially fussy over the lighting. The lamps were arranged in such a way as to throw a clear light on the side of the room where the chairs were grouped, at the same time leaving the other end of the room, where I presumed Poirot himself would sit, in a dim twilight.

Ursula and I watched him. Presently a bell was heard.

“They arrive,” said Poirot. “Good, all is in readiness.”

The door opened and the party from Fernly filed in. Poirot went forward and greeted Mrs. Ackroyd and Flora.

"It is most good of you to come," he said. "And Major Blunt and Mr. Raymond."

The secretary was debonair as ever.

"What's the great idea?" he said, laughing. "Some scientific machine? Do we have bands round our wrists which register guilty heart-beats? There is such an invention, isn't there?"

"I have read of it, yes," admitted Poirot. "But me, I am old-fashioned. I use the old methods. I work only with the little gray cells. Now let us begin—but first I have an announcement to make to you all."

He took Ursula's hand and drew her forward.

"This lady is Mrs. Ralph Paton. She was married to Captain Paton last March."

A little shriek burst from Mrs. Ackroyd.

"Ralph! Married! Last March! Oh! but it's absurd. How could he be?" She stared at Ursula as though she had never seen her before.

"Married to Bourne?" she said. "Really, M. Poirot, I don't believe you."

Ursula flushed and began to speak, but Flora forestalled her.

Going quickly to the other girl's side, she passed her hand through her arm.

"You must not mind our being surprised," she said. "You see, we had no idea of such a thing. You and Ralph have kept your secret very well. I am—very glad about it."

"You are very kind, Miss Ackroyd," said Ursula in a low voice, "and you have every right to be exceedingly angry. Ralph behaved very badly—especially to you."

"You needn't worry about that," said Flora, giving her arm a consoling little pat. "Ralph was in a corner and took the only way out. I should probably have done the same in his place. I do think he might have trusted me with the secret, though. I wouldn't have let him down."

Poirot rapped gently on a table and cleared his throat significantly.

"The board meeting's going to begin," said Flora. "M. Poirot hints that we mustn't talk. But just tell me one thing. Where is Ralph? You must know if any one does."

"But I don't," cried Ursula, almost in a wail. "That's just it, I don't."

"Isn't he detained at Liverpool?" asked Raymond. "It said so in the paper."

"He is not at Liverpool," said Poirot shortly.

"In fact," I remarked, "no one knows where he is."

"Excepting Hercule Poirot, eh?" said Raymond.

Poirot replied seriously to the other's banter.

"Me, I know everything. Remember that."

Geoffrey Raymond lifted his eyebrows.

"Everything?" He whistled. "Whew! that's a tall order."

"Do you mean to say you can really guess where Ralph Paton is hiding?" I asked incredulously.

"You call it guessing. I call it knowing, my friend."

"In Cranchester?" I hazarded.

"No," replied Poirot gravely, "not in Cranchester."

He said no more, but at a gesture from him the assembled party took their seats. As they did so, the door opened once more and two other people came in and sat down near the door. They were Parker and the housekeeper.

"The number is complete," said Poirot. "Every one is here."

There was a ring of satisfaction in his tone. And with the sound of it I saw a ripple of something like uneasiness pass over all those faces grouped at the other end of the room. There was a suggestion in all this as of a trap—a trap that had closed.

Poirot read from a list in an important manner.

"Mrs. Ackroyd, Miss Flora Ackroyd, Major Blunt, Mr. Geoffrey Raymond, Mrs. Ralph Paton, John Parker, Elizabeth Russell."

He laid the paper down on the table.

"What's the meaning of all this?" began Raymond.

"The list I have just read," said Poirot, "is a list of suspected persons. Every one of you present had the opportunity to kill Mr. Ackroyd—"

With a cry Mrs. Ackroyd sprang up, her throat working.

"I don't like it," she wailed. "I don't like it. I would much prefer to go home."

"You cannot go home, madame," said Poirot sternly, "until you have heard what I have to say."

He paused a moment, then cleared his throat.

"I will start at the beginning. When Miss Ackroyd asked me to investigate the case, I went up to Fernly Park with the good Dr. Sheppard. I walked with him along the terrace, where I was shown the footprints on the window-sill. From there Inspector Raglan took me along the path which leads to the drive. My eye was caught by a little summer-house, and I searched it thoroughly. I found two things—a scrap of starched cambric and an empty goose quill. The scrap of cambric immediately suggested to me a maid's apron. When Inspector Raglan showed me his list of the people in the house, I noticed at once that one of the maids—Ursula Bourne, the parlormaid—had no real alibi. According to her own story, she was in her bedroom from nine-thirty until ten. But supposing that instead she was in the summer-house? If so, she must have gone there to meet some one. Now we know from Dr. Sheppard that some one from outside *did* come to the house that night—the stranger whom he met just by the gate. At a first glance it would seem that our problem was solved, and that the stranger went to the summer-house to meet Ursula Bourne. It was fairly certain that he *did* go to the summer-

house because of the goose quill. That suggested at once to my mind a taker of drugs—and one who had acquired the habit on the other side of the Atlantic where sniffing ‘snow’ is more common than in this country. The man whom Dr. Sheppard met had an American accent, which fitted in with that supposition.

“But I was held up by one point. *The times did not fit.* Ursula Bourne could certainly not have gone to the summer-house before nine-thirty, whereas the man must have got there by a few minutes past nine. I could, of course, assume that he waited there for half an hour. The only alternative supposition was that there had been two separate meetings in the summer-house that night. *Eh bien*, as soon as I went into that alternative I found several significant facts. I discovered that Miss Russell, the housekeeper, had visited Dr. Sheppard that morning, and had displayed a good deal of interest in cures for victims of the drug habit. Taking that in conjunction with the goose quill, I assumed that the man in question came to Fernly to meet the housekeeper, and not Ursula Bourne. Who, then, did Ursula Bourne come to the rendezvous to meet? I was not long in doubt. First I found a ring—a wedding ring—with ‘From R.’ and a date inside it. Then I learnt that Ralph Paton had been seen coming up the path which led to the summer-house at twenty-five minutes past nine, and I also heard of a certain conversation which had taken place in the wood near the village that very afternoon—a conversation between Ralph Paton and some unknown girl. So I had my facts succeeding each other in a neat and orderly manner. A secret marriage, an engagement announced on the day of the tragedy, the stormy interview in the wood, and the meeting arranged for the summer-house that night.

“Incidentally this proved to me one thing, that both Ralph Paton and Ursula Bourne (or Paton) had the strongest motives for wishing Mr. Ackroyd out of the way. And it also made one other point unexpectedly clear. It could not have been Ralph Paton who was with Mr. Ackroyd in the study at nine-thirty.

“So we come to another and most interesting aspect of the crime. Who was it in the room with Mr. Ackroyd at nine-thirty? Not Ralph Paton, who was in the summer-house with his wife. Not Charles Kent, who had already left. Who, then? I posed my cleverest—my most audacious question: *Was any one with him?*”

Poirot leaned forward and shot the last words triumphantly at us, drawing back afterwards with the air of one who has made a decided hit.

Raymond, however, did not seem impressed, and lodged a mild protest.

“I don’t know if you’re trying to make me out a liar, M. Poirot, but the matter does not rest on my evidence alone—except perhaps as to the exact words used. Remember, Major Blunt also heard Mr. Ackroyd talking to some

one. He was on the terrace outside, and couldn't catch the words clearly, but he distinctly heard the voices."

Poirot nodded.

"I have not forgotten," he said quietly. "But Major Blunt was under the impression that it was *you* to whom Mr. Ackroyd was speaking."

For a moment Raymond seemed taken aback. Then he recovered himself.

"Blunt knows now that he was mistaken," he said.

"Exactly," agreed the other man.

"Yet there must have been some reason for his thinking so," mused Poirot. "Oh! no," he held up his hand in protest, "I know the reason you will give—but it is not enough. We must seek elsewhere. I will put it this way. From the beginning of the case I have been struck by one thing—the nature of those words which Mr. Raymond overheard. It has been amazing to me that no one has commented on them—has seen anything odd about them."

He paused a minute, and then quoted softly:—

"'. . . *The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late that I fear it is impossible for me to accede to your request.*' Does nothing strike you as odd about that?"

"I don't think so," said Raymond. "He has frequently dictated letters to me, using almost exactly those same words."

"Exactly," cried Poirot. "That is what I seek to arrive at. Would any man use such a phrase in *talking* to another? Impossible that that should be part of a real conversation. Now, if he had been dictating a letter—"

"You mean he was reading a letter aloud," said Raymond slowly. "Even so, he must have been reading to some one."

"But why? We have no evidence that there was any one else in the room. No other voice but Mr. Ackroyd's was heard, remember."

"Surely a man wouldn't read letters of that type aloud to himself—not unless he was—well—going balmy."

"You have all forgotten one thing," said Poirot softly: "the stranger who called at the house the preceding Wednesday."

They all stared at him.

"But yes," said Poirot, nodding encouragingly, "on Wednesday. The young man was not of himself important. But the firm he represented interested me very much."

"The Dictaphone Company," gasped Raymond. "I see it now. A dictaphone. That's what you think?"

Poirot nodded.

"Mr. Ackroyd had promised to invest in a dictaphone, you remember. Me, I had the curiosity to inquire of the company in question. Their reply is that Mr. Ackroyd *did* purchase a dictaphone from their representative. Why he concealed the matter from you, I do not know."

"He must have meant to surprise me with it," murmured Raymond. "He had quite a childish love of surprising people. Meant to keep it up his sleeve for a day or so. Probably was playing with it like a new toy. Yes, it fits in. You're quite right—no one would use quite those words in casual conversation."

"It explains, too," said Poirot, "why Major Blunt thought it was you who were in the study. Such scraps as came to him were fragments of dictation, and so his subconscious mind deduced that you were with him. His conscious mind was occupied with something quite different—the white figure he had caught a glimpse of. He fancied it was Miss Ackroyd. Really, of course, it was Ursula Bourne's white apron he saw as she was stealing down to the summer-house."

Raymond had recovered from his first surprise.

"All the same," he remarked, "this discovery of yours, brilliant though it is (I'm quite sure I should never have thought of it), leaves the essential position unchanged. Mr. Ackroyd was alive at nine-thirty, since he was speaking into the dictaphone. It seems clear that the man Charles Kent was really off the premises by then. As to Ralph Paton—?"

He hesitated, glancing at Ursula.

Her color flared up, but she answered steadily enough.

"Ralph and I parted just before a quarter to ten. He never went near the house, I am sure of that. He had no intention of doing so. The last thing on earth he wanted was to face his stepfather. He would have funk'd it badly."

"It isn't that I doubt your story for a moment," explained Raymond. "I've always been quite sure Captain Paton was innocent. But one has to think of a court of law—and the questions that would be asked. He is in a most unfortunate position, but if he were to come forward——"

Poirot interrupted.

"That is your advice, yes? That he should come forward?"

"Certainly. If you know where he is——"

"I perceive that you do not believe that I do know. And yet I have told you just now that I know everything. The truth of the telephone call, of the footprints on the window-sill, of the hiding-place of Ralph Paton——"

"Where is he?" said Blunt sharply.

"Not very far away," said Poirot, smiling.

"In Cranchester?" I asked.

Poirot turned towards me.

"Always you ask me that. The idea of Cranchester it is with you an *idée fixe*. No, he is not in Cranchester. He is—*there!*"

He pointed a dramatic forefinger. Every one's head turned.

Ralph Paton was standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXIV

RALPH PATON'S STORY

IT WAS a very uncomfortable minute for *me*. I hardly took in what happened next, but there were exclamations and cries of surprise! When I was sufficiently master of myself to be able to realize what was going on, Ralph Paton was standing by his wife, her hand in his, and he was smiling across the room at me.

Poirot, too, was smiling, and at the same time shaking an eloquent finger at me.

"Have I not told you at least thirty-six times that it is useless to conceal things from Hercule Poirot?" he demanded. "That in such a case he finds out?"

He turned to the others.

"One day, you remember, we held a little séance about a table—just the six of us. I accused the other five persons present of concealing something from me. Four of them gave up their secret. Dr. Sheppard did not give up his. But all along I have had my suspicions. Dr. Sheppard went to the Three Boars that night hoping to find Ralph. He did not find him there; but supposing, I said to myself, that he met him in the street on his way home? Dr. Sheppard was a friend of Captain Paton's, and he had come straight from the scene of the crime. He must know that things looked very black against him. Perhaps he knew more than the general public did——"

"I did," I said ruefully. "I suppose I might as well make a clean breast of things now. I went to see Ralph that afternoon. At first he refused to take me into his confidence, but later he told me about his marriage, and the hole he was in. As soon as the murder was discovered, I realized that once the facts were known, suspicion could not fail to attach to Ralph—or, if not to him, to the girl he loved. That night I put the facts plainly before him. The thought of having possibly to give evidence which might incriminate his wife made him resolve at all costs to—to——"

I hesitated, and Ralph filled up the gap.

"To do a bunk," he said graphically. "You see, Ursula left me to go back to the house. I thought it possible that she might have attempted to have another interview with my stepfather. He had already been very rude to her that afternoon. It occurred to me that he might have so insulted her—in such an unforgivable manner—that without knowing what she was doing——"

He stopped. Ursula released her hand from his, and stepped back.

"You thought that, Ralph! You actually thought that I might have done it?"

"Let us get back to the culpable conduct of Dr. Sheppard," said Poirot

dryly. "Dr. Sheppard consented to do what he could to help him. He was successful in hiding Captain Paton from the police."

"Where?" asked Raymond. "In his own house?"

"Ah, no, indeed," said Poirot. "You should ask yourself the question that I did. If the good doctor is concealing the young man, what place would he choose? It must necessarily be somewhere near at hand. I think of Cranchester. A hotel? No. Lodgings? Even more emphatically, no. Where, then? Ah! I have it. A nursing home. A home for the mentally unfit. I test my theory. I invent a nephew with mental trouble. I consult Mademoiselle Sheppard as to suitable homes. She gives me the names of two near Cranchester to which her brother has sent patients. I make inquiries. Yes, at one of them a patient was brought there by the doctor himself early on Saturday morning. That patient, though known by another name, I had no difficulty in identifying as Captain Paton. After certain necessary formalities, I was allowed to bring him away. He arrived at my house in the early hours of yesterday morning."

I looked at him ruefully.

"Caroline's Home Office expert," I murmured. "And to think I never guessed!"

"You see now why I drew attention to the reticence of your manuscript," murmured Poirot. "It was strictly truthful as far as it went—but it did not go very far, eh, my friend?"

I was too abashed to argue.

"Dr. Sheppard has been very loyal," said Ralph. "He has stood by me through thick and thin. He did what he thought was the best. I see now, from what M. Poirot has told me, that it was not really the best. I should have come forward and faced the music. You see, in the home, we never saw a newspaper. I knew nothing of what was going on."

"Dr. Sheppard has been a model of discretion," said Poirot dryly. "But me, I discover all the little secrets. It is my business."

"Now we can have your story of what happened that night," said Raymond impatiently.

"You know it already," said Ralph. "There's very little for me to add. I left the summer-house about nine-forty-five, and tramped about the lanes, trying to make up my mind as to what to do next—what line to take. I'm bound to admit that I've not the shadow of an alibi, but I give you my solemn word that I never went to the study, that I never saw my stepfather alive—or dead. Whatever the world thinks, I'd like all of you to believe me."

"No alibi," murmured Raymond. "That's bad. I believe you, of course, but—it's a bad business."

"It makes things very simple, though," said Poirot, in a cheerful voice. "Very simple indeed."

We all stared at him.

"You see what I mean? No? Just this—to save Captain Paton the real criminal must confess."

He beamed round at us all.

"But yes—I mean what I say. See now, I did not invite Inspector Raglan to be present. That was for a reason. I did not want to tell him all that I knew—at least I did not want to tell him to-night."

He leaned forward, and suddenly his voice and his whole personality changed. He suddenly became dangerous.

"I who speak to you—I know the murderer of Mr. Ackroyd is in this room now. It is to the murderer I speak. *To-morrow the truth goes to Inspector Raglan.* You understand?"

There was a tense silence. Into the midst of it came the old Breton woman with a telegram on a salver. Poirot tore it open.

Blunt's voice rose abrupt and resonant.

"The murderer is amongst us, you say? You know—which?"

Poirot had read the message. He crumpled it up in his hand.

"I know—now."

He tapped the crumpled ball of paper.

"What is that?" said Raymond sharply.

"A wireless message—from a steamer now on her way to the United States."

There was a dead silence. Poirot rose to his feet bowing.

"Messieurs et Mesdames, this reunion of mine is at an end. Remember—*the truth goes to Inspector Raglan in the morning.*"

CHAPTER XXV

THE WHOLE TRUTH

A SLIGHT gesture from Poirot enjoined me to stay behind the rest. I obeyed, going over to the fire and thoughtfully stirring the big logs on it with the toe of my boot.

I was puzzled. For the first time I was absolutely at sea as to Poirot's meaning. For a moment I was inclined to think that the scene I had just witnessed was a gigantic piece of bombast—that he had been what he called "playing the comedy" with a view to making himself interesting and important. But, in spite of myself, I was forced to believe in an underlying reality. There had been real menace in his words—a certain indisputable sincerity. But I still believed him to be on entirely the wrong tack.

When the door shut behind the last of the party he came over to the fire.

"Well, my friend," he said quietly, "and what do you think of it all?"

"I don't know what to think," I said frankly. "What was the point? Why

not go straight to Inspector Raglan with the truth instead of giving the guilty person this elaborate warning?"

Poirot sat down and drew out his case of tiny Russian cigarettes. He smoked for a minute or two in silence. Then:—

"Use your little gray cells," he said. "There is always a reason behind my actions."

I hesitated for a moment, and then I said slowly:

"The first one that occurs to me is that you yourself do not know who the guilty person is, but that you are sure that he is to be found amongst the people here to-night. Therefore your words were intended to force a confession from the unknown murderer?"

Poirot nodded approvingly.

"A clever idea, but not the truth."

"I thought, perhaps, that by making him believe you knew, you might force him out into the open—not necessarily by confession. He might try to silence you as he formerly silenced Mr. Ackroyd—before you could act to-morrow morning."

"A trap with myself as the bait! *Merci, mon ami*, but I am not sufficiently heroic for that."

"Then I fail to understand you. Surely you are running the risk of letting the murderer escape by thus putting him on his guard?"

Poirot shook his head.

"He cannot escape," he said gravely. "There is only one way out—and that way does not lead to freedom."

"You really believe that one of those people here to-night committed the murder?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, my friend."

"Which one?"

There was a silence for some minutes. Then Poirot tossed the stump of his cigarette into the grate and began to speak in a quiet, reflective tone.

"I will take you the way that I have traveled myself. Step by step you shall accompany me, and see for yourself that all the facts point indisputably to one person. Now, to begin with, there were two facts and one little discrepancy in time which especially attracted my attention. The first fact was the telephone call. If Ralph Paton were indeed the murderer, the telephone call became meaningless and absurd. Therefore, I said to myself, Ralph Paton is not the murderer.

"I satisfied myself that the call could not have been sent by any one in the house, yet I was convinced that it was amongst those present on the fatal evening that I had to look for my criminal. Therefore I concluded that the telephone call must have been sent by an accomplice. I was not quite pleased with that deduction, but I let it stand for the minute.

"I next examined the *motive* for the call. That was difficult. I could only get at it by judging its *result*. Which was—that the murder was discovered that night instead of—in all probability—the following morning. You agree with that?"

"Ye-es," I admitted. "Yes. As you say, Mr. Ackroyd, having given orders that he was not to be disturbed, nobody would have been likely to go to the study that night."

"*Tres bien*. The affair marches, does it not? But matters were still obscure. What was the advantage of having the crime discovered that night in preference to the following morning? The only idea I could get hold of was that the murderer, knowing the crime was to be discovered at a certain time, could make sure of being present when the door was broken in—or at any rate immediately afterwards. And now we come to the second fact—the chair pulled out from the wall. Inspector Raglan dismissed that as of no importance. I, on the contrary, have always regarded it as of supreme importance.

"In your manuscript you have drawn a neat little plan of the study. If you had it with you this minute you would see that—the chair being drawn out in the position indicated by Parker—it would stand in a direct line between the door and the window."

"The window!" I said quickly.

"You, too, have my first idea. I imagined that the chair was drawn out so that something connected with the window should not be seen by any one entering through the door. But I soon abandoned that supposition, for though the chair was a grandfather with a high back, it obscured very little of the window—only the part between the sash and the ground. No, *mon ami*—but remember that just in front of the window there stood a table with books and magazines upon it. Now that table *was* completely hidden by the drawn-out chair—and immediately I had my first shadowy suspicion of the truth.

"Supposing that there had been something on that table not intended to be seen? Something placed there by the murderer? As yet I had no inkling of what that something might be. But I knew certain very interesting facts about it. For instance, it was something that the murderer had not been able to take away with him at the time that he committed the crime. At the same time it was vital that it should be removed as soon as possible after the crime had been discovered. And so—the telephone message, and the opportunity for the murderer to be on the spot when the body was discovered.

"Now four people were on the scene before the police arrived. Yourself, Parker, Major Blunt, and Mr. Raymond. Parker I eliminated at once, since at whatever time the crime was discovered, he was the one person certain to be on the spot. Also it was he who told me of the pulled-out chair. Parker,

then, was cleared (of the murder, that is. I still thought it possible that he had been blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars). Raymond and Blunt, however, remained under suspicion since, if the crime had been discovered in the early hours of the morning, it was quite possible that they might have arrived on the scene too late to prevent the object on the round table being discovered.

"Now what was that object? You heard my arguments to-night in reference to the scrap of conversation overheard? As soon as I learned that a representative of a dictaphone company had called, the idea of a dictaphone took root in my mind. You heard what I said in this room not half an hour ago? They all agreed with my theory—but one vital fact seems to have escaped them. Granted that a dictaphone was being used by Mr. Ackroyd that night—why was no dictaphone found?"

"I never thought of that," I said.

"We know that a dictaphone was supplied to Mr. Ackroyd. But no dictaphone has been found amongst his effects. So, if something was taken from that table—why should not that something be the dictaphone? But there were certain difficulties in the way. The attention of every one was, of course, focused on the murdered man. I think any one could have gone to the table unnoticed by the other people in the room. But a dictaphone has a certain bulk—it cannot be slipped casually into a pocket. There must have been a receptacle of some kind capable of holding it.

"You see where I am arriving? The figure of the murderer is taking shape. A person who was on the scene straightway, but who might not have been if the crime had been discovered the following morning. A person carrying a receptacle into which the dictaphone might be fitted——"

I interrupted.

"But why remove the dictaphone? What was the point?"

"You are like Mr. Raymond. You take it for granted that what was heard at nine-thirty was Mr. Ackroyd's voice speaking into a dictaphone. But consider this useful invention for a little minute. You dictate into it, do you not? And at some later time a secretary or a typist turns it on, and the voice speaks again."

"You mean——" I gasped.

Poirot nodded.

"Yes, I mean that. *At nine-thirty Mr. Ackroyd was already dead.* It was the dictaphone speaking—not the man."

"And the murderer switched it on. Then he must have been in the room at that minute?"

"Possibly. But we must not exclude the likelihood of some mechanical device having been applied—something after the nature of a time lock, or even of a simple alarm clock. But in that case we must add two qualifications to our imaginary portrait of the murderer. It must be some one who knew

of Mr. Ackroyd's purchase of the dictaphone and also some one with the necessary mechanical knowledge.

"I had got thus far in my own mind when we came to the footprints on the window ledge. Here there were three conclusions open to me. (1) They might really have been made by Ralph Paton. He had been at Fernly that night, and might have climbed into the study and found his uncle dead there. That was one hypothesis. (2) There was the possibility that the footmarks might have been made by somebody else who happened to have the same kind of studs in his shoes. But the inmates of the house had shoes soled with crepe rubber, and I declined to believe in the coincidence of some one from outside having the same kind of shoes as Ralph Paton wore. Charles Kent, as we know from the barmaid of the Dog and Whistle, had on a pair of boots 'clean dropping off him.' (3) Those prints were made by some one deliberately trying to throw suspicion on Ralph Paton. To test this last conclusion, it was necessary to ascertain certain facts. One pair of Ralph's shoes had been obtained from the Three Boars by the police. Neither Ralph nor any one else could have worn them that evening, since they were downstairs being cleaned. According to the police theory, Ralph was wearing another pair of the same kind, and I found out that it was true that he had two pairs. Now for my theory to be proved correct it was necessary for the murderer to have worn Ralph's shoes that evening—in which case Ralph must have been wearing yet a *third* pair of footwear of some kind. I could hardly suppose that he would bring three pairs of shoes all alike—the third pair of footwear were more likely to be boots. I got your sister to make inquiries on this point—laying some stress on the color, in order—I admit it frankly—to obscure the real reason for my asking.

"You know the result of her investigations. Ralph Paton *had* had a pair of boots with him. The first question I asked him when he came to my house yesterday morning was what he was wearing on his feet on the fatal night. He replied at once that he had worn *boots*—he was still wearing them, in fact—having nothing else to put on.

"So we get a step further in our description of the murderer—a person who had the opportunity to take these shoes of Ralph Paton's from the Three Boars that day."

He paused, and then said, with a slightly raised voice:—

"There is one further point. The murderer must have been a person who had the opportunity to purloin that dagger from the silver table. You might argue that any one in the house might have done so, but I will recall to you that Miss Ackroyd was very positive that the dagger was not there when she examined the silver table."

He paused again.

"Let us recapitulate—now that all is clear. A person who was at the Three

Boars earlier that day, a person who knew Ackroyd well enough to know that he had purchased a dictaphone, a person who was of a mechanical turn of mind, who had the opportunity to take the dagger from the silver table before Miss Flora arrived, who had with him a receptacle suitable for hiding the dictaphone—such as a black bag, and who had the study to himself for a few minutes after the crime was discovered while Parker was telephoning for the police. In fact—*Dr. Sheppard!*”

CHAPTER XXVI

AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

THERE was a dead silence for a minute and a half.

Then I laughed.

“You’re mad,” I said.

“No,” said Poirot placidly. “I am not mad. It was the little discrepancy in time that first drew my attention to you—right at the beginning.”

“Discrepancy in time?” I queried, puzzled.

“But yes. You will remember that every one agreed—you yourself included—that it took five minutes to walk from the lodge to the house—less if you took the short cut to the terrace. But you left the house at ten minutes to nine—both by your own statement and that of Parker, and yet it was nine o’clock as you passed through the lodge gates. It was a chilly night—not an evening a man would be inclined to dawdle; why had you taken ten minutes to do a five-minutes’ walk? All along I realized that we had only your statement for it that the study window was ever fastened. Ackroyd asked you if you had done so—he never looked to see. Supposing, then, that the study window was unfastened? Would there be time in that ten minutes for you to run round the outside of the house, change your shoes, climb in through the window, kill Ackroyd, and get to the gate by nine o’clock? I decided against that theory since in all probability a man as nervous as Ackroyd was that night would hear you climbing in, and then there would have been a struggle. But supposing that you killed Ackroyd *before* you left—as you were standing beside his chair? Then you go out of the front door, run round to the summer-house, take Ralph Paton’s shoes out of the bag you brought up with you that night, slip them on, walk through the mud in them, and leave prints on the window ledge, you climb in, lock the study door on the inside, run back to the summer-house, change back into your own shoes, and race down to the gate. (I went through similar actions the other day, when you were with Mrs. Ackroyd—it took ten minutes exactly.) Then home—and an alibi—since you had timed the dictaphone for half-past nine.”

"My dear Poirot," I said in a voice that sounded strange and forced to my own ears, "you've been brooding over this case too long. What on earth had I to gain by murdering Ackroyd?"

"Safety. It was you who blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars. Who could have had a better knowledge of what killed Mr. Ferrars than the doctor who was attending him? When you spoke to me that first day in the garden, you mentioned a legacy received about a year ago. I have been unable to discover any trace of a legacy. You had to invent some way of accounting for Mrs. Ferrars's twenty thousand pounds. It has not done you much good. You lost most of it in speculation—then you put the screw on too hard, and Mrs. Ferrars took a way out that you had not expected. If Ackroyd had learnt the truth he would have had no mercy on you—you were ruined for ever."

"And the telephone call?" I asked, trying to rally. "You have a plausible explanation of that also, I suppose?"

"I will confess to you that it was my greatest stumbling block when I found that a call had actually been put through to you from King's Abbot station. I at first believed that you had simply invented the story. It was a very clever touch, that. You must have some excuse for arriving at Fernly, finding the body, and so getting the chance to remove the dictaphone on which your alibi depended. I had a very vague notion of how it was worked when I came to see your sister that first day and inquired as to what patients you had seen on Friday morning. I had no thought of Miss Russell in my mind at that time. Her visit was a lucky coincidence, since it distracted your mind from the real object of my questions. I found what I was looking for. Among your patients that morning was the steward of an American liner. Who more suitable than he to be leaving for Liverpool by the train that evening? And afterwards he would be on the high seas, well out of the way. I noted that the *Orion* sailed on Saturday, and having obtained the name of the steward I sent him a wireless message asking a certain question. This is his reply you saw me receive just now."

He held out the message to me. It ran as follows:—

"Quite correct. Dr. Sheppard asked me to leave a note at a patient's house. I was to ring him up from the station with the reply. Reply was 'No answer.'"

"It was a clever idea," said Poirot. "The call was genuine. Your sister saw you take it. But there was only one man's word as to what was actually said—your own!"

I yawned.

"All this," I said, "is very interesting—but hardly in the sphere of practical politics."

"You think not? Remember what I said—the truth goes to Inspector Rag-

lan in the morning. But, for the sake of your good sister, I am willing to give you the chance of another way out. There might be, for instance, an overdose of a sleeping draught. You comprehend me? But Captain Ralph Paton must be cleared—*ça va sans dire*. I should suggest that you finish that very interesting manuscript of yours—but abandoning your former reticence.”

“You seem to be very prolific of suggestions,” I remarked. “Are you sure you’ve quite finished.”

“Now that you remind me of the fact, it is true that there is one thing more. It would be most unwise on your part to attempt to silence me as you silenced M. Ackroyd. That kind of business does not succeed against Hercule Poirot, you understand.”

“My dear Poirot,” I said, smiling a little, “whatever else I may be, I am not a fool.”

I rose to my feet.

“Well, well,” I said, with a slight yawn, “I must be off home. Thank you for a most interesting and instructive evening.”

Poirot also rose and bowed with his accustomed politeness as I passed out of the room.

CHAPTER XXVII

APOLOGIA

FIVE A.M. I am very tired—but I have finished my task. My arm aches from writing.

A strange end to my manuscript. I meant it to be published some day as the history of one of Poirot’s failures! Odd, how things pan out.

All along I’ve had a premonition of disaster, from the moment I saw Ralph Paton and Mrs. Ferrars with their heads together. I thought then that she was confiding in him; as it happened I was quite wrong there, but the idea persisted even after I went into the study with Ackroyd that night, until he told me the truth.

Poor old Ackroyd. I’m always glad that I gave him a chance. I urged him to read that letter before it was too late. Or let me be honest—didn’t I subconsciously realize that with a pig-headed chap like him, it was my best chance of getting him *not* to read it? His nervousness that night was interesting psychologically. He knew danger was close at hand. And yet he never suspected *me*.

The dagger was an afterthought. I’d brought up a very handy little weapon of my own, but when I saw the dagger lying in the silver table, it occurred to me at once how much better it would be to use a weapon that couldn’t be traced to *me*.

I suppose I must have meant to murder him all along. As soon as I heard of Mrs. Ferrars's death, I felt convinced that she would have told him everything before she died. When I met him and he seemed so agitated, I thought that perhaps he knew the truth, but that he couldn't bring himself to believe it, and was going to give me the chance of refuting it.

So I went home and took my precautions. If the trouble were after all only something to do with Ralph—well, no harm would have been done. The dictaphone he had given me two days before to adjust. Something had gone a little wrong with it, and I persuaded him to let me have a go at it, instead of sending it back. I did what I wanted to it, and took it up with me in my bag that evening.

I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following:—

"The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone."

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?

When I looked round the room from the door, I was quite satisfied. Nothing had been left undone. The dictaphone was on the table by the window, timed to go off at nine-thirty (the mechanism of that little device was rather clever—based on the principle of an alarm clock), and the arm-chair was pulled out so as to hide it from the door.

I must admit that it gave me rather a shock to run into Parker just outside the door. I have faithfully recorded that fact.

Then later, when the body was discovered, and I had sent Parker to telephone for the police, what a judicious use of words: *"I did what little had to be done!"* It was quite little—just to shove the dictaphone into my bag and push back the chair against the wall in its proper place. I never dreamed that Parker would have noticed that chair. Logically, he ought to have been so agog over the body as to be blind to everything else. But I hadn't reckoned with the trained-servant complex.

I wish I could have known beforehand that Flora was going to say she'd seen her uncle alive at a quarter to ten. That puzzled me more than I can say. In fact, all through the case there have been things that puzzled me hopelessly. Every one seems to have taken a hand.

My greatest fear all through has been Caroline. I have fancied she might guess. Curious the way she spoke that day of my "strain of weakness."

Well, she will never know the truth. There is, as Poirot said, one way out. . . .

I can trust him. He and Inspector Raglan will manage it between them. I should not like Caroline to know. She is fond of me, and then, too, she is proud. . . . My death will be a grief to her, but grief passes. . . .

When I have finished writing, I shall enclose this whole manuscript in an envelope and address it to Poirot.

And then—what shall it be? Veronal? There would be a kind of poetic justice. Not that I take any responsibility for Mrs. Ferrars's death. It was the direct consequence of her own actions. I feel no pity for her.

I have no pity for myself either.

So let it be veronal.

But I wish Hercule Poirot had never retired from work and come here to grow vegetable marrows.

And Then There Were None



CHAPTER I

IN THE CORNER of a first-class smoking carriage, Mr. Justice Wargrave, lately retired from the bench, puffed at a cigar and ran an interested eye through the political news in the *Times*.

He laid the paper down and glanced out of the window. They were running now through Somerset. He glanced at his watch—another two hours to go.

He went over in his mind all that had appeared in the papers about Indian Island. There had been its original purchase by an American millionaire who was crazy about yachting—and an account of the luxurious modern house he had built on this little island off the Devon coast. The unfortunate fact that the new third wife of the American millionaire was a bad sailor had led to the subsequent putting up of the house and island for sale. Various glowing advertisements of it had appeared in the papers. Then came the first bald statement that it had been bought—by a Mr. Owen. After that the rumours of the gossip writers had started. Indian Island had really been bought by Miss Gabrielle Turl, the Hollywood film star! She wanted to spend some months there free from all publicity! *Busy Bee* had hinted delicately that it was to be an abode for Royalty?! Mr. *Merryweather* had had it whispered to him that it had been bought for a honeymoon—Young Lord L— had surrendered to Cupid at last! *Jonas* knew for a *fact* that it had been purchased by the Admiralty with a view to carrying out some very hush hush experiments!

Definitely, Indian Island was news!

From his pocket Mr. Justice Wargrave drew out a letter. The handwriting was practically illegible but words here and there stood out with unexpected clarity. *Dearest Lawrence . . . such years since I heard anything of you . . . must come to Indian Island . . . the most enchanting place . . . so much to talk over . . . old days . . . communion with Nature . . . bask in sunshine . . . 12.40 from Paddington . . . meet you at Oakbridge . . .* and his correspondent signed herself with a flourish *his ever Constance Culmington*.

Mr. Justice Wargrave cast back in his mind to remember when exactly he had last seen Lady Constance Culmington. It must be seven—no, eight years ago. She had then been going to Italy to bask in the sun and be at one with Nature and the *contadini*. Later, he had heard, she had proceeded to Syria where she proposed to bask in yet stronger sun and live at one with Nature and the *bedouin*.

Constance Culmington, he reflected to himself, was exactly the sort of woman who *would* buy an island and surround herself with mystery! Nodding

his head in gentle approval of his logic, Mr. Justice Wargrave allowed his head to nod. . . .

He slept. . . .

2

Vera Claythorne, in a third-class carriage with five other travellers in it, leaned her head back and shut her eyes. How hot it was travelling by train to-day! It would be nice to get to the sea! Really a great piece of luck getting this job. When you wanted a holiday post it nearly always meant looking after a swarm of children—secretarial holiday posts were much more difficult to get. Even the agency hadn't held out much hope.

And then the letter had come.

"I have received your name from the Skilled Women's Agency together with their recommendation. I understand they know you personally. I shall be glad to pay you the salary you ask and shall expect you to take up your duties on August 8th. The train is the 12.40 from Paddington and you will be met at Oakbridge station. I enclose five pound notes for expenses.

Yours truly,

Una Nancy Owen."

And at the top was the stamped address *Indian Island, Sticklehaven, Devon. . . .*

Indian Island! Why, there had been nothing else in the papers lately! All sorts of hints and interesting rumours. Though probably that was mostly untrue. But the house had certainly been built by a millionaire and was said to be absolutely the last word in luxury.

Vera Claythorne, tired by a recent strenuous term at school, thought to herself—"Being a games mistress in a third-class school isn't much of a catch. . . . If only I could get a job at some *decent* school."

And then, with a cold feeling round her heart, she thought: "But I'm lucky to have even this. After all, people don't like a Coroner's Inquest, even if the Coroner *did* acquit me of all blame!"

He had even complimented her on her presence of mind and courage, she remembered. For an inquest it couldn't have gone better. And Mrs. Hamilton had been kindness itself to her—Only Hugo—(*but she wouldn't think of Hugo!*)

Suddenly, in spite of the heat in the carriage she shivered and wished she wasn't going to the sea. A picture rose clearly before her mind. *Cyril's head, bobbing up and down, swimming to the rock. . . . Up and down—up and down. . . . And herself, swimming in easy practised strokes after him—cleaving her way through the water but knowing, only too surely, that she wouldn't be in time. . . .*

The sea—its deep warm blue—mornings spent lying out on the sands—Hugo—Hugo who had said he loved her. . . .

She must *not* think of Hugo. . . .

She opened her eyes and frowned across at the man opposite her. A tall man with a brown face, light eyes set rather close together and an arrogant almost cruel mouth.

She thought to herself:

"I bet he's been to some interesting parts of the world and seen some interesting things. . . ."

3

Philip Lombard, summing up the girl opposite in a mere flash of his quick moving eyes thought to himself:

"Quite attractive—a bit schoolmistressy perhaps. . . ."

A cool customer, he should imagine—and one who could hold her own—in love or war. He'd rather like to take her on. . . .

He frowned. No, cut out all that kind of stuff. This was business. He'd got to keep his mind on the job.

What exactly was up, he wondered? That little Jew had been damned mysterious.

"Take it or leave it, Captain Lombard."

He had said thoughtfully:

"A hundred guineas, eh?"

He had said it in a casual way as though a hundred guineas was nothing to him. A *hundred guineas* when he was literally down to his last square meal! He had fancied, though, that the little Jew had not been deceived—that was the damnable part about Jews, you couldn't deceive them about money—they *knew*!

He had said in the same casual tone:

"And you can't give me any further information?"

Mr. Isaac Morris had shaken his little bald head very positively.

"No, Captain Lombard, the matter rests there. It is understood by my client that your reputation is that of a good man in a tight place. I am empowered to hand you one hundred guineas in return for which you will travel to Sticklehaven, Devon. The nearest station is Oakbridge, you will be met there and motored to Sticklehaven where a motor launch will convey you to Indian Island. There you will hold yourself at the disposal of my client."

Lombard had said abruptly:

"For how long?"

"Not longer than a week at most."

Fingering his small moustache, Captain Lombard said:

"You understand I can't undertake anything—illegal?"

He had darted a very sharp glance at the other as he had spoken. There had been a very faint smile on the thick Semitic lips of Mr. Morris as he answered gravely:

"If anything illegal is proposed, you will, of course, be at perfect liberty to withdraw."

Damn the smooth little brute, he had smiled! It was as though he knew very well that in Lombard's past actions legality had not always been a *sine qua non*. . . .

Lombard's own lips parted in a grin.

By Jove, he'd sailed pretty near the wind once or twice! But he'd always got away with it! There wasn't much he drew the line at really. . . .

No, there wasn't much he'd draw the line at. He fancied that he was going to enjoy himself at Indian Island. . . .

4

In a non-smoking carriage Miss Emily Brent sat very upright as was her custom. She was sixty-five and she did not approve of lounging. Her father, a Colonel of the old school, had been particular about deportment.

The present generation was shamelessly lax—in their carriage, *and in every other way*. . . .

Enveloped in an aura of righteousness and unyielding principles, Miss Brent sat in her crowded third-class carriage and triumphed over its discomfort and its heat. Every one made such a fuss over things nowadays! They wanted injections before they had teeth pulled—they took drugs if they couldn't sleep—they wanted easy chairs and cushions and the girls allowed their figures to slop about anyhow and lay about half naked on the beaches in summer.

Miss Brent's lips set closely. She would like to make an example of certain people.

She remembered last year's summer holiday. This year, however, it would be quite different. Indian Island. . . .

Mentally she reread the letter which she had already read so many times.

Dear Miss Brent,

I do hope you remember me? We were together at Bellhaven Guest House in August some years ago, and we seemed to have so much in common.

I am starting a guest house of my own on an island off the coast of Devon. I think there is really an opening for a place where there is good plain cooking and a nice old-fashioned type of person. None of this nudity and gramophones half the night. I shall be very glad if you could see your way to

spending your summer holiday on Indian Island—quite free—as my guest. Would early in August suit you? Perhaps the 8th.

Yours sincerely,

U. N. —

What was the name? The signature was rather difficult to read. Emily Brent thought impatiently: "So many people write their signatures quite illegibly."

She let her mind run back over the people at Bellhaven. She had been there two summers running. There had been that nice middle-aged woman—Mrs.—Mrs.—now what *was* her name?—her father had been a Canon. And there had been a Miss Olton—Ormen—No, surely it was *Oliver!* Yes—Oliver.

Indian Island! There had been things in the paper about Indian Island—something about a film star—or was it an American millionaire?

Of course often those places went very cheap—*islands* didn't suit everybody. They thought the idea was romantic but when they came to live there they realized the disadvantages and were only too glad to sell.

Emily Brent thought to herself: "*I shall be getting a free holiday at any rate.*"

With her income so much reduced and so many dividends not being paid, that was indeed something to take into consideration. If only she could remember a little more about Mrs.—or was it Miss—Oliver?

5

General Macarthur looked out of the carriage window. The train was just coming into Exeter where he had to change. Damnable, these slow branch line trains! This place, Indian Island, was really no distance at all as the crow flies.

He hadn't got it clear who this fellow Owen was. A friend of Spoof Leggard's, apparently—and of Johnny Dyer's.

—One or two of your old cronies are coming—would like to have a talk over old times.

Well, he'd enjoy a chat about old times. He'd had a fancy lately that fellows were rather fighting shy of him. All owing to that damned rumour! By God, it was pretty hard—nearly thirty years ago now! Armitage had talked, he supposed. Damned young pup! What did *he* know about it? Oh, well, no good brooding about these things! One fancied things sometimes—fancied a fellow was looking at you queerly.

This Indian Island now, he'd be interested to see it. A lot of gossip flying about. Looked as though there might be something in the rumour that the Admiralty or the War Office or the Air Force had got hold of it. . . .

Young Elmer Robson, the American millionaire, had actually built the place. Spent thousands on it, so it was said. Every mortal luxury. . . .

Exeter! And an hour to wait! And he didn't want to wait. He wanted to get on. . . .

6

Dr. Armstrong was driving his Morris across Salisbury Plain. He was very tired. . . . Success had its penalties. There had been a time when he had sat in his consulting room in Harley Street, correctly apparelled, surrounded with the most up-to-date appliances and the most luxurious furnishings and waited—waited through the empty days for his venture to succeed or fail. . . .

Well, it had succeeded! He'd been lucky! Lucky *and* skilful of course. He was a good man at his job—but that wasn't enough for success. You had to have luck as well. And he'd had it! An accurate diagnosis, a couple of grateful women patients—women with money and position—and word had got about. "You ought to try Armstrong—*quite* a young man—but so clever— Pam had been to all sorts of people for *years* and he put his finger on the trouble at once!" The ball had started rolling.

And now Dr. Armstrong had definitely arrived. His days were full. He had little leisure. And so, on this August morning, he was glad that he was leaving London and going to be for some days on an island off the Devon coast. Not that it was exactly a holiday. The letter he had received had been rather vague in its terms, but there was nothing vague about the accompanying cheque. A whacking fee. These Owens must be rolling in money. Some little difficulty, it seemed, a husband who was worried about his wife's health and wanted a report on it without her being alarmed. She wouldn't hear of seeing a doctor. Her nerves—

Nerves! The doctor's eyebrows went up. These women and their nerves! Well, it was good for business, after all. Half the women who consulted him had nothing the matter with them but boredom, but they wouldn't thank you for telling them so! And one could usually find something.

"A slightly uncommon condition of the—some long word—nothing at all serious—but it just needs putting right. A simple treatment."

Well, medicine was mostly faith-healing when it came to it. And he had a good manner—he could inspire hope and belief.

Lucky that he'd managed to pull himself together in time after that business ten—no, fifteen years ago. It had been a near thing, that! He'd been going to pieces. The shock had pulled him together. He'd cut out drink altogether. By Jove, it had been a near thing though. . . .

With a devastating ear-splitting blast on the horn an enormous Super Sports Dalmain car rushed past him at eighty miles an hour. Dr. Armstrong

nearly went into the hedge. One of these young fools who tore round the country. He hated them. That had been a near shave, too. Damned young fool!

7

Tony Marston, roaring down into Mere, thought to himself:

"The amount of cars crawling about the roads is frightful. Always something blocking your way. *And* they will drive in the middle of the road! Pretty hopeless driving in England, anyway. . . . Not like France where you really *could* let out. . . ."

Should he stop here for a drink, or push on? Heaps of time! Only another hundred miles and a bit to go. He'd have a gin and gingerbeer. Fizzing hot day!

This island place ought to be rather good fun—if the weather lasted. Who *were* these Owens, he wondered? Rich and stinking, probably. Badger was rather good at nosing people like that out. Of course, he *had* to, poor old chap, with no money of his own. . . .

Hope they'd do one well in drinks. Never knew with these fellows who'd made their money and weren't born to it. Pity that story about Gabrielle Turl having bought Indian Island wasn't true. He'd like to have been in with that film star crowd.

Oh, well, he supposed there'd be a few girls there. . . .

Coming out of the Hotel, he stretched himself, yawned, looked up at the blue sky and climbed into the Dalmain.

Several young women looked at him admiringly—his six feet of well-proportioned body, his crisp hair, tanned face, and intensely blue eyes.

He let in the clutch with a roar and leapt up the narrow street. Old men and errand boys jumped for safety. The latter looked after the car admiringly.

Anthony Marston proceeded on his triumphal progress.

8

Mr. Blore was in the slow train from Plymouth. There was only one other person in his carriage, an elderly seafaring gentleman with a bleary eye. At the present moment he had dropped off to sleep.

Mr. Blore was writing carefully in a little notebook.

"That's the lot," he muttered to himself. "Emily Brent, Vera Claythorne, Dr. Armstrong, Anthony Marston, old Justice Wargrave, Philip Lombard, General Macarthur, C.M.G., D.S.O. Manservant and wife: Mr. and Mrs. Rogers."

He closed the notebook and put it back in his pocket. He glanced over at the corner and the slumbering man.

"Had one over the eight," diagnosed Mr. Blore accurately.

He went over things carefully and conscientiously in his mind.

"Job ought to be easy enough," he ruminated. "Don't see how I can slip up on it. Hope I look all right."

He stood up and scrutinized himself anxiously in the glass. The face reflected there was of a slightly military cast with a moustache. There was very little expression in it. The eyes were grey and set rather close together.

"Might be a Major," said Mr. Blore. "No, I forgot. There's that old military gent. He'd spot me at once.

"South Africa," said Mr. Blore, "that's my line! None of these people have anything to do with South Africa, and I've just been reading that travel folder so I can talk about it all right."

Fortunately there were all sorts and types of colonials. As a man of means from South Africa, Mr. Blore felt that he could enter into any society unchallenged.

Indian Island. He remembered Indian Island as a boy. . . . Smelly sort of rock covered with gulls—stood about a mile from the coast. It had got its name from its resemblance to a man's head—an American Indian profile.

Funny idea to go and build a house on it! Awful in bad weather! But millionaires were full of whims!

The old man in the corner woke up and said:

"You can't never tell at sea—never!"

Mr. Blore said soothingly, "That's right. You can't."

The old man hiccuped twice and said plaintively:

"There's a squall coming."

Mr. Blore said:

"No, no, mate, it's a lovely day."

The old man said angrily:

"There's a squall ahead. I can *smell* it."

"Maybe you're right," said Mr. Blore pacifically.

The train stopped at a station and the old fellow rose unsteadily.

"Thish where I get out." He fumbled with the window. Mr. Blore helped him.

The old man stood in the doorway. He raised a solemn hand and blinked his bleary eyes.

"Watch and pray," he said. "Watch and pray. The day of judgment is at hand."

He collapsed through the doorway onto the platform. From a recumbent position he looked up at Mr. Blore and said with immense dignity:

"I'm talking to *you*, young man. The day of judgment is very close at hand."

Subsiding onto his seat Mr. Blore thought to himself:

"He's nearer the day of judgment than I am!"
But there, as it happens, he was wrong. . . .

CHAPTER II

OUTSIDE OAKBRIDGE STATION a little group of people stood in momentary uncertainty. Behind them stood porters with suitcases. One of these called "Jim!"

The driver of one of the taxis stepped forward.

"You'm for Indian Island, maybe?" he asked in a soft Devon voice. Four voices gave assent—and then immediately afterwards gave quick surreptitious glances at each other.

The driver said, addressing his remarks to Mr. Justice Wargrave as the senior member of the party:

"There are two taxis here, sir. One of them must wait till the slow train from Exeter gets in—a matter of five minutes—there's one gentleman coming by that. Perhaps one of you wouldn't mind waiting? You'd be more comfortable that way."

Vera Claythorne, her own secretarial position clear in her mind, spoke at once.

"I'll wait," she said, "if you will go on." She looked at the other three, her glance and voice had that slight suggestion of command in it that comes from having occupied a position of authority. She might have been directing which tennis sets the girls were to play in.

Miss Brent said stiffly, "Thank you," bent her head and entered one of the taxis, the door of which the driver was holding open.

Mr. Justice Wargrave followed her.

Captain Lombard said:

"I'll wait with Miss—"

"Claythorne," said Vera.

"My name is Lombard. Philip Lombard."

The porters were piling luggage on the taxi. Inside, Mr. Justice Wargrave said with due legal caution:

"Beautiful weather we are having."

Miss Brent said:

"Yes, indeed."

A very distinguished old gentleman, she thought to herself. Quite unlike the usual type of man in seaside guest houses. Evidently Mrs. or Miss Oliver had good connections. . . .

Mr. Justice Wargrave inquired:

"Do you know this part of the world well?"

"I have been to Cornwall and to Torquay, but this is my first visit to this part of Devon."

The judge said:

"I also am unacquainted with this part of the world."

The taxi drove off.

The driver of the second taxi said:

"Like to sit inside while you're waiting?"

Vera said decisively:

"Not at all."

Captain Lombard smiled.

He said:

"That sunny wall looks more attractive. Unless you'd rather go inside the station?"

"No, indeed. It's so delightful to get out of that stuffy train."

He answered:

"Yes, travelling by train *is* rather trying in this weather."

Vera said conventionally:

"I do hope it lasts—the weather, I mean. Our English summers are so treacherous."

With a slight lack of originality Lombard asked:

"Do you know this part of the world well?"

"No, I've never been here before." She added quickly, conscientiously determined to make her position clear at once, "I haven't even seen my employer yet."

"Your employer?"

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Owen's secretary."

"Oh, I see." Just imperceptibly his manner changed. It was slightly more assured—easier in tone. He said: "Isn't that rather unusual?"

Vera laughed.

"Oh, no, I don't think so. Her own secretary was suddenly taken ill and she wired to an agency for a substitute and they sent me."

"So that was it. And suppose you don't like the post when you've got there?"

Vera laughed again.

"Oh, it's only temporary—a holiday post. I've got a permanent job at a girls' school. As a matter of fact I'm frightfully thrilled at the prospect of seeing Indian Island. There's been such a lot about it in the papers. Is it really very fascinating?"

Lombard said:

"I don't know. I haven't seen it."

"Oh, really? The Owens are frightfully keen on it, I suppose. What are they like? Do tell me."

Lombard thought: Awkward, this—am I supposed to have met them or not? He said quickly:

"There's a wasp crawling up your arm. No—keep quite still." He made a convincing pounce. "There. It's gone!"

"Oh, thank you. There are a lot of wasps about this summer."

"Yes, I suppose it's the heat. Who are we waiting for, do you know?"

"I haven't the least idea."

The loud drawn out scream of an approaching train was heard. Lombard said:

"That will be the train now."

2

It was a tall soldierly old man who appeared at the exit from the platform. His grey hair was clipped close and he had a neatly trimmed white moustache.

His porter, staggering slightly under the weight of the solid leather suitcase, indicated Vera and Lombard.

Vera came forward in a competent manner. She said:

"I am Mrs. Owen's secretary. There is a car here waiting." She added: "This is Mr. Lombard."

The faded blue eyes, shrewd in spite of their age, sized up Lombard. For a moment a judgment showed in them—had there been any one to read it.

"Good-looking fellow. Something just a little wrong about him. . . ."

The three of them got into the waiting taxi. They drove through the sleepy streets of little Oakbridge and continued about a mile on the main Plymouth road. Then they plunged into a maze of cross country lanes, steep, green and narrow.

General Macarthur said:

"Don't know this part of Devon at all. My little place is in East Devon—just on the border-line of Dorset."

Vera said:

"It really is lovely here. The hills and the red earth and everything so green and luscious looking."

Philip Lombard said critically:

"It's a bit shut in. . . . I like open country myself. Where you can see what's coming. . . ."

General Macarthur said to him:

"You've seen a bit of the world, I fancy?"

Lombard shrugged his shoulders disparagingly.

"I've knocked about here and there, sir."

He thought to himself: "He'll ask me now if I was old enough to be in the War. These old boys always do."

But General Macarthur did not mention the War.

3

They came up over a steep hill and down a zig-zag track to Sticklehaven—mere cluster of cottages with a fishing boat or two drawn up on the beach. Illuminated by the setting sun, they had their first glimpse of Indian Is and jutting up out of the sea to the south.

Vera said, surprised:

“It’s a long way out.”

She had pictured it differently, close to shore, crowned with a beautiful white house. But there was no house visible, only the boldly silhouetted rock with its faint resemblance to a giant Indian’s head. There was something sinister about it. She shivered faintly.

Outside a little inn, the Seven Stars, three people were sitting. There was the hunched elderly figure of the judge, the upright form of Miss Brent, and a third man—a big bluff man who came forward and introduced himself.

“Thought we might as well wait for you,” he said. “Make one trip of it. Allow me to introduce myself. Name’s Davis. Natal, South Africa’s, my natal spot, ha, ha!”

He laughed breezily.

Mr. Justice Wargrave looked at him with active malevolence. He seemed to be wishing that he could order the court to be cleared. Miss Emily Brent was clearly not sure if she liked Colonials.

“Any one care for a little nip before we embark?” asked Mr. Davis hospitably.

Nobody assenting to this proposition, Mr. Davis turned and held up a finger.

“Mustn’t delay, then. Our good host and hostess will be expecting us,” he said.

He might have noticed that a curious constraint came over the other members of the party. It was as though the mention of their host and hostess had a curiously paralyzing effect upon the guests.

In response to Davis’ beckoning finger, a man detached himself from a nearby wall against which he was leaning and came up to them. His rolling gait proclaimed him a man of the sea. He had a weather-beaten face and dark eyes with a slightly evasive expression. He spoke in his soft Devon voice.

“Will you be ready to be starting for the island, ladies and gentlemen? The boat’s waiting. There’s two gentlemen coming by car, but Mr. Owen’s orders was not to wait for them as they might arrive at any time.”

The party got up. Their guide led them along a small stone jetty. Alongside it a motor boat was lying.

Emily Brent said:

"That's a very small boat."

The boat's owner said persuasively:

"She's a fine boat, that, Ma'am. You could go to Plymouth in her as easy as winking."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said sharply:

"There are a good many of us."

"She'd take double the number, sir."

Philip Lombard said in his pleasant easy voice:

"It's quite all right. Glorious weather—no swell."

Rather doubtfully, Miss Brent permitted herself to be helped into the boat. The others followed suit. There was as yet no fraternizing among the party. It was as though each member of it was puzzled by the other members.

They were just about to cast loose when their guide paused, boat-hook in hand.

Down the steep track into the village a car was coming. A car so fantastically powerful, so superlatively beautiful that it had all the nature of an apparition. At the wheel sat a young man, his hair blown back by the wind. In the blaze of the evening light he looked, not a man, but a young God, a Hero God out of some Northern Saga.

He touched the horn and a great roar of sound echoed from the rocks of the bay.

It was a fantastic moment. In it, Anthony Marston seemed to be something more than mortal. Afterwards, more than one of those present remembered that moment.

4

Fred Narracott sat by the engine thinking to himself that this was a queer lot. Not at all his idea of what Mr. Owen's guests were likely to be. He'd expected something altogether more classy. Toggled up women and gentlemen in yachting costume and all very rich and important looking.

Not at all like Mr. Elmer Robson's parties. A faint grin came to Fred Narracott's lips as he remembered the millionaire's guests. That had been a party if you like—and the drink they'd got through!

This Mr. Owen must be a very different sort of gentleman. Funny it was, thought Fred, that he'd never yet set eyes on Owen—or his Missus either. Never been down here yet, he hadn't. Everything ordered and paid for by that Mr. Morris. Instructions always very clear and payment prompt, but it was odd, all the same. The papers said there was some mystery about Owen. Mr. Narracott agreed with them.

Perhaps, after all, it was Miss Gabrielle Turl who had bought the island. But that theory departed from him as he surveyed his passengers. Not this

lot—none of them looked likely to have anything to do with a film star.

He summed them up dispassionately.

One old maid—the sour kind—he knew them well enough. She was a Tartar, he could bet. Old military gentleman—real Army by the look of him. Nice looking young lady—but the ordinary kind, not glamorous—no Hollywood touch about her. That bluff cheery gent—*he* wasn't a real gentleman. Retired tradesman, that's what he is, thought Fred Narracott. The other gentleman, the lean hungry looking gentleman with the quick eyes, he was a queer one, he was. Just possible he *might* have something to do with the pictures.

No, there was only one satisfactory passenger in the boat. The last gentleman, the one who had arrived in the car (and what a car! A car such as had never been seen in Sticklehaven before. Must have cost hundreds and hundreds, a car like that.). He was the right kind. Born to money, he was. If the party had been all like him . . . he'd understand it. . . .

Queer business when you came to think of it—the whole thing was queer—very queer. . . .

5

The boat churned its way round the rock. Now at last the house came into view. The south side of the island was quite different. It shelved gently down to the sea. The house was there facing south—low and square and modern-looking with rounded windows letting in all the light.

An exciting house—a house that lived up to expectation!

Fred Narracott shut off the engine, they nosed their way gently into a little natural inlet between rocks.

Philip Lombard said sharply:

"Must be difficult to land here in dirty weather."

Fred Narracott said cheerfully:

"Can't land on Indian Island when there's a southeasterly. Sometimes 'tis cut off for a week or more."

Vera Claythorne thought:

"The catering must be very difficult. That's the worst of an island. All the domestic problems are so worrying."

The boat grated against the rocks. Fred Narracott jumped out and he and Lombard helped the others to alight. Narracott made the boat fast to a ring in the rock. Then he led the way up steps cut in the rock.

General Macarthur said:

"Ha, delightful spot!"

But he felt uneasy. Damned odd sort of place.

As the party ascended the steps, and came out on a terrace above, their spirits revived. In the open doorway of the house a correct butler was await-

ing them, and something about his gravity reassured them. And then the house itself was really most attractive, the view from the terrace magnificent. . . .

The butler came forward bowing slightly. He was a tall lank man, grey-haired and very respectable. He said:

"Will you come this way, please?"

In the wide hall drinks stood ready. Rows of bottles. Anthony Marston's spirits cheered up a little. He'd just been thinking this was a rum kind of show. None of *his* lot! What could old Badger have been thinking about to let him in for this? However the drinks were all right. Plenty of ice, too.

What was it the butler chap was saying?

Mr. Owen—unfortunately delayed—unable to get here till to-morrow. Instructions—everything they wanted—if they would like to go to their rooms? . . . Dinner would be at 8 o'clock. . . .

6

Vera had followed Mrs. Rogers upstairs. The woman had thrown open a door at the end of a passage and Vera had walked into a delightful bedroom with a big window that opened wide upon the sea and another looking east. She uttered a quick exclamation of pleasure.

Mrs. Rogers was saying:

"I hope you've got everything you want, Miss?"

Vera looked round. Her luggage had been brought up and had been unpacked. At one side of the room a door stood open into a pale blue tiled bathroom.

She said quickly:

"Yes, everything, I think."

"You'll ring the bell if you want anything, Miss?"

Mrs. Rogers had a flat monotonous voice. Vera looked at her curiously. What a white bloodless ghost of a woman! Very respectable looking, with her hair dragged back from her face and her black dress. Queer light eyes that shifted the whole time from place to place.

Vera thought:

"She looks frightened of her own shadow."

Yes, that was it—frightened!

She looked like a woman who walked in mortal fear. . . .

A little shiver passed down Vera's back. What on earth was the woman afraid of?

She said pleasantly:

"I'm Mrs. Owen's new secretary. I expect you know that."

Mrs. Rogers said:

"No, Miss, I don't know anything. Just a list of the ladies and gentlemen and what rooms they were to have."

Vera said:

"Mrs. Owen didn't mention me?"

Mrs. Rogers' eyelashes flickered.

"I haven't seen Mrs. Owen—not yet. We only came here two days ago."

Extraordinary people, these Owens, thought Vera. Aloud she said:

"What staff is there here?"

"Just me and Rogers, Miss."

Vera frowned. Eight people in the house—ten with the host and hostess—and only one married couple to do for them.

Mrs. Rogers said:

"I'm a good cook and Rogers is handy about the house. I didn't know, of course, that there was to be such a large party."

Vera said:

"But you can manage?"

"Oh, yes, Miss, I can manage. If there's to be large parties often, perhaps Mrs. Owen could get extra help in."

Vera said, "I expect so."

Mrs. Rogers turned to go. Her feet moved noiselessly over the floor. She drifted from the room like a shadow.

Vera went over to the window and sat down on the window seat. She was faintly disturbed. Everything—somehow—was a little queer. The absence of the Owens, the pale ghostlike Mrs. Rogers. And the guests! Yes, the guests were queer too. An oddly assorted party.

Vera thought:

"I wish I'd seen the Owens. . . . I wish I knew what they were like." She got up and walked restlessly about the room.

A perfect bedroom decorated throughout in the modern style. Off white rugs on the gleaming parquet floor—faintly tinted walls—a long mirror surrounded by lights. A mantelpiece bare of ornaments save for an enormous block of white marble shaped like a bear, a piece of modern sculpture in which was inset a clock. Over it, in a gleaming chromium frame, was a big square of parchment—a poem.

She stood in front of the fireplace and read it. It was the old nursery rhyme that she remembered from her childhood days.

Ten little Indian boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self and then there were nine.

Nine little Indian boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself and then there were eight.

Eight little Indian boys travelling in Devon;
One said he'd stay there and then there were seven.

Seven little Indian boys chopping up sticks;
One chopped himself in halves and then there were six.

Six little Indian boys playing with a hive;
A bumblebee stung one and then there were five.

Five little Indian boys going in for law;
One got in Chancery and then there were four.

Four little Indian boys going out to sea;
A red herring swallowed one and then there were three.

Three little Indian boys walking in the Zoo;
A big bear hugged one and then there were two.

Two little Indian boys sitting in the sun;
One got frizzled up and then there was one.

One little Indian boy left all alone;
He went and hanged himself and then there were none.

Vera smiled. Of course! This was Indian Island!

She went and sat again by the window looking out to sea.

How big the sea was! From here there was no land to be seen anywhere—just a vast expanse of blue water rippling in the evening sun.

The sea. . . . So peaceful to-day—sometimes so cruel. . . . The sea that dragged you down to its depths. Drowned. . . . Found drowned. . . . Drowned at sea. . . . Drowned—drowned—drowned. . . .

No, she wouldn't remember. . . . She would *not* think of it!

All that was over. . . .

7

Dr. Armstrong came to Indian Island just as the sun was sinking into the sea. On the way across he had chatted to the boatman—a local man. He was anxious to find out a little about these people who owned Indian Island, but the man Narracott seemed curiously ill informed, or perhaps unwilling to talk.

So Dr. Armstrong chatted instead of the weather and of fishing.

He was tired after his long motor drive. His eyeballs ached. Driving west you were driving against the sun.

Yes, he was very tired. The sea and perfect peace—that was what he needed. He would like, really, to take a long holiday. But he couldn't afford to do that. He could afford it financially, of course, but he couldn't afford to drop

out. You were soon forgotten nowadays. No, now that he had arrived, he must keep his nose to the grindstone.

He thought:

"All the same, this evening, I'll imagine to myself that I'm not going back—that I've done with London and Harley Street and all the rest of it."

There was something magical about an island—the mere word suggested fantasy. You lost touch with the world—an island was a world of its own. A world, perhaps, from which you might never return.

He thought:

"I'm leaving my ordinary life behind me."

And, smiling to himself, he began to make plans, fantastic plans for the future.

He was still smiling when he walked up the rock cut steps.

In a chair on the terrace an old gentleman was sitting and the sight of him was vaguely familiar to Dr. Armstrong. Where had he seen that frog-like face, that tortoise-like neck, that hunched up attitude—yes, and those pale shrewd little eyes? Of course—old Wargrave. He'd given evidence once before him. Always looked half asleep, but was shrewd as could be when it came to a point of law. Had great power with a jury—it was said he could make their minds up for them any day of the week. He'd got one or two unlikely convictions out of them. A hanging judge, some people said.

Funny place to meet him . . . here—out of the world.

8

Mr. Justice Wargrave thought to himself:

"Armstrong? Remember him in the witness box. Very correct and cautious. All doctors are damned fools. Harley Street ones are the worst of the lot." And his mind dwelt malevolently on a recent interview he had had with a suave personage in that very street.

Aloud he grunted:

"Drinks are in the hall."

Dr. Armstrong said:

"I must go and pay my respects to my host and hostess."

Mr. Justice Wargrave closed his eyes again, looking decidedly reptilian, and said:

"You can't do that."

Dr. Armstrong was startled.

"Why not?"

The judge said:

"No host and hostess. Very curious state of affairs. Don't understand this place."

Dr. Armstrong stared at him for a minute. When he thought the old gentleman had actually gone to sleep, Wargrave said suddenly:

"D'you know Constance Culmington?"

"Er—no, I'm afraid I don't."

"It's of no consequence," said the judge. "Very vague woman—and practically unreadable handwriting. I was just wondering if I'd come to the wrong house."

Dr. Armstrong shook his head and went on up to the house.

Mr. Justice Wargrave reflected on the subject of Constance Culmington. Undependable like all women.

His mind went on to the two women in the house, the tight-lipped old maid and the girl. He didn't care for the girl, cold-blooded young hussy. No, three women, if you counted the Rogers woman. Odd creature, she looked scared to death. Respectable pair and knew their job.

Rogers coming out on the terrace that minute, the judge asked him:

"Is Lady Constance Culmington expected, do you know?"

Rogers stared at him.

"No, sir, not to my knowledge."

The judge's eyebrows rose. But he only grunted.

He thought:

"Indian Island, eh? There's a nigger in the woodpile."

9

Anthony Marston was in his bath. He luxuriated in the steaming water. His limbs had felt cramped after his long drive. Very few thoughts passed through his head. Anthony was a creature of sensation—and of action.

He thought to himself:

"Must go through with it, I suppose," and thereafter dismissed everything from his mind.

Warm steaming water—tired limbs—presently a shave—a cocktail—dinner. And after—?

10

Mr. Blore was tying his tie. He wasn't very good at this sort of thing. Did he look all right? He supposed so.

Nobody had been exactly cordial to him. . . . Funny the way they all eyed each other—as though they *knew*. . . .

Well, it was up to him.

He didn't mean to bungle his job.

He glanced up at the framed nursery rhyme over the mantelpiece.

Neat touch, having that there!

He thought:

Remember this island when I was a kid. Never thought I'd be doing this sort of a job in a house here. Good thing, perhaps, that one can't foresee the future. . . .

11

General Macarthur was frowning to himself.

Damn it all, the whole thing was deuced odd! Not at all what he'd been led to expect. . . .

For two pins he'd make an excuse and get away. . . . Throw up the whole business. . . .

But the motor boat had gone back to the mainland.

He'd have to stay.

That fellow Lombard now, he was a queer chap.

Not straight. He'd swear the man wasn't straight.

12

As the gong sounded, Philip Lombard came out of his room and walked to the head of the stairs. He moved like a panther, smoothly and noiselessly. There was something of the panther about him altogether. A beast of prey—pleasant to the eye.

He was smiling to himself.

A week—eh?

He was going to enjoy that week.

13

In her bedroom, Emily Brent, dressed in black silk ready for dinner, was reading her Bible.

Her lips moved as she followed the words:

"The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken. The Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth: the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands. The wicked shall be turned into hell."

Her tight lips closed. She shut the Bible.

Rising, she pinned a cairngorm brooch at her neck, and went down to dinner.

CHAPTER III

DINNER WAS drawing to a close.

The food had been good, the wine perfect. Rogers waited well.

Every one was in better spirits. They had begun to talk to each other with more freedom and intimacy.

Mr. Justice Wargrave, mellowed by the excellent port, was being amusing in a caustic fashion, Dr. Armstrong and Tony Marston were listening to him. Miss Brent chatted to General Macarthur, they had discovered some mutual friends. Vera Claythorne was asking Mr. Davis intelligent questions about South Africa. Mr. Davis was quite fluent on the subject. Lombard listened to the conversation. Once or twice he looked up quickly, and his eyes narrowed. Now and then his eyes played round the table, studying the others.

Anthony Marston said suddenly:

"Quaint, these things, aren't they?"

In the centre of the round table, on a circular glass stand, were some little china figures.

"Indians," said Tony. "Indian Island. I suppose that's the idea."

Vera leaned forward.

"I wonder. How many are there? Ten?"

"Yes—ten there are."

Vera cried:

"What fun! They're the ten little Indian boys of the nursery rhyme, I suppose. In my bedroom the rhyme is framed and hung up over the mantel-piece."

Lombard said:

"In my room, too."

"And mine."

"And mine."

Everybody joined the chorus. Vera said:

"It's an amusing idea, isn't it?"

Mr. Justice Wargrave grunted:

"Remarkably childish," and helped himself to port.

Emily Brent looked at Vera Claythorne. Vera Claythorne looked at Miss Brent. The two women rose.

In the drawing-room, the French windows were open onto the terrace and the sound of the sea murmuring against the rocks came up to them.

Emily Brent said: "Pleasant sound."

Vera said sharply: "I hate it."

Miss Brent's eyes looked at her in surprise. Vera flushed. She said, more composedly:

"I don't think this place would be very agreeable in a storm."

Emily Brent agreed.

"I've no doubt the house is shut up in winter," she said. "You'd never get servants to stay here for one thing."

Vera murmured:

"It must be difficult to get servants anyway."

Emily Brent said:

"Mrs. Oliver has been lucky to get these two. The woman's a good cook."

Vera thought:

"Funny how elderly people always get names wrong."

She said:

"Yes, I think Mrs. Owen has been very lucky indeed."

Emily Brent had brought a small piece of embroidery out of her bag. Now, as she was about to thread her needle, she paused. She said sharply:

"Owen? Did you say Owen?"

"Yes."

Emily Brent said sharply:

"I've never met any one called Owen in my life."

Vera stared.

"But surely—"

She did not finish her sentence. The door opened and the men joined them. Rogers followed them into the room with the coffee tray.

The judge came and sat down by Emily Brent. Armstrong came up to Vera. Tony Marston strolled to the open window. Blore studied with naïve surprise a statuette in brass—wondering perhaps if its bizarre angularities were really supposed to be the female figure. General Macarthur stood with his back to the mantelpiece. He pulled at his little white moustache. That had been a damned good dinner! His spirits were rising. Lombard turned over the pages of *Punch* that lay with other papers on a table by the wall.

Rogers went round with the coffee tray. The coffee was good—really black and very hot.

The whole party had dined well. They were satisfied with themselves and with life. The hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes past nine. There was a silence—a comfortable replete silence.

Into that silence came The Voice. Without warning, inhuman, penetrating . . .

"Ladies and gentlemen! Silence, please!"

Every one was startled. They looked round—at each other, at the walls. Who was speaking?

The Voice went on—a high clear voice.

You are charged with the following indictments:

Edward George Armstrong, that you did upon the 14th day of March, 1925, cause the death of Louisa Mary Clees.

Emily Caroline Brent, that upon the 5th November, 1931, you were responsible for the death of Beatrice Taylor.

William Henry Blore, that you brought about the death of James Stephen Landon on October 10th, 1928.

Vera Elizabeth Claythorne, that on the 11th day of August, 1935, you killed Cyril Ogilvie Hamilton.

Philip Lombard, that upon a date in February, 1932, you were guilty of the death of twenty-one men, members of an East African tribe.

John Gordon Macarthur, that on the 4th of January, 1917, you deliberately sent your wife's lover, Arthur Richmond, to his death.

Anthony James Marston, that upon the 14th day of November last, you were guilty of the murder of John and Lucy Combes.

Thomas Rogers and Ethel Rogers, that on the 6th of May, 1929, you brought about the death of Jennifer Brady.

Lawrence John Wargrave, that upon the 10th day of June, 1930, you were guilty of the murder of Edward Seton.

Prisoners at the bar, have you anything to say in your defence?

2

The Voice had stopped.

There was a moment's petrified silence and then a resounding crash! Rogers had dropped the coffee tray!

At the same moment, from somewhere outside the room there came a scream and the sound of a thud.

Lombard was the first to move. He leapt to the door and flung it open. Outside, lying in a huddled mass, was Mrs. Rogers.

Lombard called:

"Marston."

Anthony sprang to help him. Between them, they lifted up the woman and carried her into the drawing-room.

Dr. Armstrong came across quickly. He helped them to lift her onto the sofa and bent over her. He said quickly:

"It's nothing. She's fainted, that's all. She'll be round in a minute."

Lombard said to Rogers:

"Get some brandy."

Rogers, his face white, his hands shaking, murmured:

"Yes, sir," and slipped quickly out of the room.

Vera cried out:

"Who was that speaking? Where was he? It sounded—it sounded—"

General Macarthur spluttered out:

"What's going on here? What kind of a practical joke was that?"

His hand was shaking. His shoulders sagged. He looked suddenly ten years older.

Blore was mopping his face with a handkerchief.

Only Mr. Justice Wargrave and Miss Brent seemed comparatively unmoved. Emily Brent sat upright, her head held high. In both cheeks was a

spot of hard colour. The judge sat in his habitual pose, his head sunk down into his neck. With one hand he gently scratched his ear. Only his eyes were active, darting round and round the room, puzzled, alert with intelligence.

Again it was Lombard who acted. Armstrong being busy with the collapsed woman, Lombard was free once more to take the initiative.

He said:

"That voice? It sounded as though it were in the room."

Vera cried:

"*Who was it?* Who was it? It wasn't one of us."

Like the judge, Lombard's eyes wandered slowly round the room. They rested a minute on the open window, then he shook his head decisively. Suddenly his eyes lighted up. He moved forward swiftly to where a door near the fireplace led into an adjoining room.

With a swift gesture, he caught the handle and flung the door open. He passed through and immediately uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

He said:

"Ah, here we are."

The others crowded after him. Only Miss Brent remained alone sitting erect in her chair.

Inside the second room a table had been brought up close to the wall which adjoined the drawing-room. On the table was a gramophone—an old-fashioned type with a large trumpet attached. The mouth of the trumpet was against the wall, and Lombard, pushing it aside, indicated where two or three small holes had been unobtrusively bored through the wall.

Adjusting the gramophone he replaced the needle on the record and immediately they heard again: "*You are charged with the following indictments—*"

Vera cried:

"Turn it off! Turn it off! It's horrible!"

Lombard obeyed.

Dr. Armstrong said, with a sigh of relief:

"A disgraceful and heartless practical joke, I suppose."

The small clear voice of Mr. Justice Wargrave murmured:

"So you think it's a joke, do you?"

The doctor stared at him.

"What else could it be?"

The hand of the judge gently stroked his upper lip.

He said:

"At the moment I'm not prepared to give an opinion."

Anthony Marston broke in. He said:

"Look here, there's one thing you've forgotten. Who the devil turned the thing on and set it going?"

Wargrave murmured:

"Yes, I think we must inquire into that."

He led the way back into the drawing-room. The others followed.

Rogers had just come in with a glass of brandy. Miss Brent was bending over the moaning form of Mrs. Rogers.

Adroitly Rogers slipped between the two women.

"Allow me, Madam, I'll speak to her. Ethel—Ethel—it's all right. All right, do you hear? Pull yourself together."

Mrs. Rogers' breath came in quick gasps. Her eyes, staring frightened eyes, went round and round the ring of faces. There was urgency in Rogers' tone.

"Pull yourself together, Ethel."

Dr. Armstrong spoke to her soothingly.

"You'll be all right now, Mrs. Rogers. Just a nasty turn."

She said:

"Did I faint, sir?"

"Yes."

"It was The Voice—that awful voice—*like a judgment*—"

Her face turned green again, her eyelids fluttered.

Dr. Armstrong said sharply:

"Where's that brandy?"

Rogers had put it down on a little table. Some one handed it to the doctor and he bent over the gasping woman with it.

"Drink this, Mrs. Rogers."

She drank, choking a little and gasping. The spirit did her good. The colour returned to her face. She said:

"I'm all right now. It just—gave me a turn."

Rogers said quickly:

"Of course it did. It gave me a turn too. Fair made me drop that tray. Wicked lies, it was! I'd like to know—"

He was interrupted. It was only a cough—a dry little cough but it had the effect of stopping him in full cry. He stared at Mr. Justice Wargrave and the latter coughed again. Then he said:

"Who put that record on the gramophone? Was it you, Rogers?"

Rogers cried:

"I didn't know what it was. Before God, I didn't know what it was, sir. If I had I'd never have done it."

The judge said drily:

"That is probably true. But I think you'd better explain, Rogers."

The butler wiped his face with a handkerchief. He said earnestly:

"I was just obeying orders, sir, that's all."

"Whose orders?"

"Mr. Owen's."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"Let me get this quite clear. Mr. Owen's orders were—what exactly?"

Rogers said:

"I was to put a record on the gramophone. I'd find the record in the drawer and my wife was to start the gramophone when I'd gone into the drawing-room with the coffee tray."

The judge murmured:

"A very remarkable story."

Rogers cried:

"It's the truth, sir. I swear to God it's the truth. I didn't know what it was—not for a moment. It had a name on it—I thought it was just a piece of music."

Wargrave looked at Lombard.

"Was there a title on it?"

Lombard nodded. He grinned suddenly, showing his white pointed teeth.

He said:

"Quite right, sir. It was entitled *Swan Song*. . . ."

3

General Macarthur broke out suddenly. He exclaimed:

"The whole thing is preposterous—preposterous! Slinging accusations about like this! Something must be done about it. This fellow Owen whoever he is—"

Emily Brent interrupted. She said sharply:

"That's just it, who is he?"

The judge interposed. He spoke with the authority that a lifetime in the courts had given him. He said:

"That is exactly what we must go into very carefully. I should suggest that you get your wife to bed first of all, Rogers. Then come back here."

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Armstrong said:

"I'll give you a hand, Rogers."

Leaning on the two men, Mrs. Rogers tottered out of the room. When they had gone Tony Marston said:

"Don't know about you, sir, but I could do with a drink."

Lombard said:

"I agree."

Tony said:

"I'll go and forage."

He went out of the room.

He returned a second or two later.

"Found them all waiting on a tray outside ready to be brought in."

He set down his burden carefully. The next minute or two was spent in dispensing drinks. General Macarthur had a stiff whiskey and so did the

judge. Every one felt the need of a stimulant. Only Emily Brent demanded and obtained a glass of water.

Dr. Armstrong re-entered the room.

"She's all right," he said. "I've given her a sedative to take. What's that, a drink? I could do with one."

Several of the men refilled their glasses. A moment or two later Rogers re-entered the room.

Mr. Justice Wargrave took charge of the proceedings. The room became an impromptu court of law.

The judge said:

"Now then, Rogers, we must get to the bottom of this. Who is this Mr. Owen?"

Rogers stared.

"He owns this place, sir."

"I am aware of the fact. What I want you to tell me is what you yourself know about the man."

Rogers shook his head.

"I can't say, sir. You see, I've never seen him."

There was a faint stir in the room.

General Macarthur said:

"You've never seen him? What d'yer mean?"

"We've only been here just under a week, sir, my wife and I. We were engaged by letter, through an agency. The Regina Agency in Plymouth."

Blore nodded.

"Old established firm," he volunteered.

Wargrave said:

"Have you got that letter?"

"The letter engaging us? No, sir. I didn't keep it."

"Go on with your story. You were engaged, as you say, by letter."

"Yes, sir. We were to arrive on a certain day. We did. Everything was in order here. Plenty of food in stock and everything very nice. Just needed dusting and that."

"What next?"

"Nothing, sir. We got orders—by letter again—to prepare the rooms for a houseparty and then yesterday by the afternoon post I got another letter from Mr. Owen. It said he and Mrs. Owen were detained and to do the best we could and it gave the instructions about dinner and coffee and putting on the gramophone record."

The judge said sharply:

"Surely you've got *that* letter?"

"Yes, sir, I've got it here."

He produced it from a pocket. The judge took it.

"H'm," he said. "Headed Ritz Hotel and typewritten."

With a quick movement Blore was beside him.

He said:

"If you'll just let me have a look."

He twitched it out of the other's hand, and ran his eye over it. He murmured:

"Coronation machine. Quite new—no defects. Ensign paper—the most widely used make. You won't get anything out of that. Might be fingerprints, but I doubt it."

Wargrave stared at him with sudden attention.

Anthony Marston was standing beside Blore looking over his shoulder. He said:

"Got some fancy Christian names, hasn't he? Ulick Norman Owen. Quite a mouthful."

The old judge said with a slight start:

"I am obliged to you, Mr. Marston. You have drawn my attention to a curious and suggestive point."

He looked round at the others and thrusting his neck forward like an angry tortoise, he said:

"I think the time has come for us all to pool our information. It would be well, I think, for everybody to come forward with all the information they have regarding the owner of this house." He paused and then went on. "We are all his guests. I think it would be profitable if each one of us were to explain exactly how that came about."

There was a moment's pause and then Emily Brent spoke with decision.

"There's something very peculiar about all this," she said. "I received a letter with a signature that was not very easy to read. It purported to be from a woman I had met at a certain summer resort two or three years ago. I took the name to be either Ogden or Oliver. I am acquainted with a Mrs. Oliver and also with a Miss Ogden. I am quite certain that I have never met, or become friendly with, anyone of the name of Owen."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"You have that letter, Miss Brent?"

"Yes, I will fetch it for you."

She went away and returned a minute later with the letter.

The judge read it. He said:

"I begin to understand. . . . Miss Claythorne?"

Vera explained the circumstances of her secretarial engagement.

The judge said:

"Marston?"

Anthony said:

"Got a wire. From a pal of mine. Badger Berkeley. Surprised me at the

time because I had an idea the old horse had gone to Norway. Told me to roll up here."

Again Wargrave nodded. He said:

"Dr. Armstrong?"

"I was called in professionally."

"I see. You had no previous acquaintanceship with the family?"

"No. A colleague of mine was mentioned in the letter."

The judge said:

"To give verisimilitude. . . . Yes, and that colleague, I presume, was momentarily out of touch with you?"

"Well—er—yes."

Lombard, who had been staring at Blore, said suddenly:

"Look here, I've just thought of something—"

The judge lifted a hand.

"In a minute—"

"But I—"

"We will take one thing at a time, Mr. Lombard. We are at present inquiring into the causes which have resulted in our being assembled here to-night. General Macarthur?"

Pulling at his moustache, the General muttered:

"Got a letter—from this fellow Owen—mentioned some old pals of mine who were to be here—hoped I'd excuse informal invitation. Haven't kept the letter, I'm afraid."

Wargrave said:

"Mr. Lombard?"

Lombard's brain had been active. Was he to come out in the open, or not? He made up his mind.

"Same sort of thing," he said. "Invitation, mentioned of mutual friends—I fell for it all right. I've torn up the letter."

Mr. Justice Wargrave turned his attention to Mr. Blore. His forefinger stroked his upper lip and his voice was dangerously polite.

He said: "Just now we had a somewhat disturbing experience. An apparently disembodied voice spoke to us all by name, uttering certain precise accusations against us. We will deal with those accusations presently. At the moment I am interested in a minor point. Amongst the names recited was that of William Henry Blore. But as far as we know there is no one named Blore amongst us. The name of Davis was *not* mentioned. What have you to say about that, Mr. Davis?"

Blore said sulkily:

"Cat's out of the bag, it seems. I suppose I'd better admit that my name isn't Davis."

"You are William Henry Blore?"

"That's right."

"I will add something," said Lombard. "Not only are you here under a false name, Mr. Blore, but in addition I've noticed this evening that you're a first-class liar. You claim to have come from Natal, South Africa. I know South Africa and Natal and I'm prepared to swear that you've never set foot in South Africa in your life."

All eyes were turned on Blore. Angry suspicious eyes. Anthony Marston moved a step nearer to him. His fists clenched themselves.

"Now then, you swine," he said. "Any explanation?"

Blore flung back his head and set his square jaw.

"You gentlemen have got me wrong," he said. "I've got my credentials and you can see them. I'm an ex-C.I.D. man. I run a detective agency in Plymouth. I was put on this job."

Mr. Justice Wargrave asked: "By whom?"

"This man Owen. Enclosed a handsome money order for expenses and instructed me as to what he wanted done. I was to join the houseparty, posing as a guest. I was given all your names. I was to watch you all."

"Any reason given?"

Blore said bitterly:

"Mrs. Owen's jewels. Mrs. Owen my foot! I don't believe there's any such person."

Again the forefinger of the judge stroked his lip, this time appreciatively.

"Your conclusions are, I think, justified," he said. "Ulick Norman Owen! In Miss Brent's letter, though the signature of the surname is a mere scrawl the Christian names are reasonably clear—Una Nancy—in either case, you notice, the same initials. Ulick Norman Owen—Una Nancy Owen—each time, that is to say, U. N. Owen. Or by a slight stretch of fancy, UNKNOWN!"

Vera cried:

"But this is fantastic—mad!"

The judge nodded gently.

He said:

"Oh, yes. I've no doubt in my own mind that we have been invited here by a madman—probably a dangerous homicidal lunatic."

CHAPTER IV

THERE WAS a moment's silence—a silence of dismay and bewilderment. Then the judge's small clear voice took up the thread once more.

"We will now proceed to the next stage of our inquiry. First, however, I will just add my own credentials to the list."

He took a letter from his pocket and tossed it onto the table.

"This purports to be from an old friend of mine, Lady Constance Culmington. I have not seen her for some years. She went to the East. It is exactly the kind of vague incoherent letter she would write, urging me to join her here and referring to her host and hostess in the vaguest of terms. The same technique, you will observe. I only mention it because it agrees with the other evidence—from all of which emerges one interesting point. *Whoever it was who enticed us here, that person knows or has taken the trouble to find out a good deal about us all.* He, whoever he may be, is aware of my friendship for Lady Constance—and is familiar with her epistolary style. He knows something about Dr. Armstrong's colleagues and their present whereabouts. He knows the nickname of Mr. Marston's friend and the kind of telegrams he sends. He knows exactly where Miss Brent was two years ago for her holiday and the kind of people she met there. He knows all about General Macarthur's old cronies."

He paused. Then he said:

"*He knows, you see, a good deal.* And out of his knowledge concerning us, he has made certain definite accusations."

Immediately a babel broke out.

General Macarthur shouted:

"A pack of damn lies! Slander!"

Vera cried out:

"It's iniquitous!" Her breath came fast. "Wicked!"

Rogers said hoarsely:

"A lie—a wicked lie . . . we never did—neither of us. . . ."

Anthony Marston growled:

"Don't know what the damned fool was getting at!"

The upraised hand of Mr. Justice Wargrave calmed the tumult.

He said, picking his words with care:

"I wish to say this. Our unknown friend accuses me of the murder of one Edward Seton. I remember Seton perfectly well. He came up before me for trial in June of the year 1930. He was charged with the murder of an elderly woman. He was very ably defended and made a good impression on the jury in the witness box. Nevertheless, on the evidence, he was certainly guilty. I summed up accordingly, and the jury brought in a verdict of Guilty. In passing sentence of death I concurred with the verdict. An appeal was lodged on the grounds of misdirection. The appeal was rejected and the man was duly executed. I wish to say before you all that my conscience is perfectly clear on the matter. I did my duty and nothing more. I passed sentence on a rightly convicted murderer."

Armstrong was remembering now. The Seton case! The verdict had come as a great surprise. He had met Matthews, K.C., on one of the days of the trial dining at a restaurant. Matthews had been confident. "Not a doubt of

the verdict. Acquittal practically certain." And then afterwards he had heard comments: "Judge was dead against him. Turned the jury right round and they brought him in guilty. Quite legal, though. Old Wargrave knows his law." "It was almost as though he had a private down on the fellow."

All these memories rushed through the doctor's mind. Before he could consider the wisdom of the question he had asked impulsively:

"Did you know Seton at all? I mean previous to the case."

The hooded reptilian eyes met his. In a clear cold voice the judge said:

"I knew nothing of Seton previous to the case."

Armstrong said to himself:

"The fellow's lying—I know he's lying."

2

Vera Claythorne spoke in a trembling voice.

She said:

"I'd like to tell you. About that child—Cyril Hamilton. I was nursery governess to him. He was forbidden to swim out far. One day, when my attention was distracted, he started off. I swam after him . . . I couldn't get there in time. . . . It was awful. . . . But it wasn't my fault. At the inquest the Coroner exonerated me. And his mother—she was so kind. If even she didn't blame me, why should—why should this awful thing be said? It's not fair—not fair . . ."

She broke down, weeping bitterly.

General Macarthur patted her shoulder.

He said:

"There, there, my dear. Of course it's not true. Fellow's a madman. A madman! Got a bee in his bonnet! Got hold of the wrong end of the stick all round."

He stood erect, squaring his shoulders. He barked out:

"Best really to leave this sort of thing unanswered. However, feel I ought to say—no truth—no truth whatever in what he said about—er—young Arthur Richmond. Richmond was one of my officers. I sent him on a reconnaissance. He was killed. Natural course of events in war time. Wish to say resent very much—slur on my wife. Best woman in the world. Absolutely—Caesar's wife!"

General Macarthur sat down. His shaking hand pulled at his moustache. The effort to speak had cost him a good deal.

Lombard spoke. His eyes were amused. He said:

"About those natives—"

Marston said:

"What about them?"

Philip Lombard grinned.

"Story's quite true! I left 'em! Matter of self-preservation. We were lost in the bush. I and a couple of other fellows took what food there was and cleared out."

General Macarthur said sternly:

"You abandoned your men—left them to starve?"

Lombard said:

"Not quite the act of a *pukka sahib*, I'm afraid. But self-preservation's a man's first duty. And natives don't mind dying, you know. They don't feel about it as Europeans do."

Vera lifted her face from her hands. She said, staring at him:

"You left them—to die?"

Lombard answered:

"I left them to die."

His amused eyes looked into her horrified ones.

Anthony Marston said in a slow puzzled voice:

"I've just been thinking—John and Lucy Combes. Must have been a couple of kids I ran over near Cambridge. Beastly bad luck."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said acidly:

"For them, or for you?"

Anthony said:

"Well, I was thinking—for me—but of course, you're right, sir, it was damned bad luck on them. Of course it was a pure accident. They rushed out of some cottage or other. I had my licence endorsed for a year. Beastly nuisance."

Dr. Armstrong said warmly:

"This speeding's all wrong—all wrong! Young men like you are a danger to the community."

Anthony shrugged his shoulders.

He said:

"Speed's come to stay. English roads are hopeless, of course. Can't get up a decent pace on them."

He looked round vaguely for his glass, picked it up off a table and went over to the side table and helped himself to another whiskey and soda. He said over his shoulder:

"Well, anyway, it wasn't my fault. Just an accident!"

3

The manservant, Rogers, had been moistening his lips and twisting his hands. He said now in a low deferential voice:

"If I might just say a word, sir."

Lombard said:

"Go ahead, Rogers."

Rogers cleared his throat and passed his tongue once more over his dry lips.

"There was a mention, sir, of me and Mrs. Rogers. And of Miss Brady. There isn't a word of truth in it, sir. My wife and I were with Miss Brady till she died. She was always in poor health, sir, always from the time we came to her. There was a storm, sir, that night—the night she was taken bad. The telephone was out of order. We couldn't get the doctor to her. I went for him, sir, on foot. But he got there too late. We'd done everything possible for her, sir. Devoted to her, we were. Any one will tell you the same. There was never a word said against us. Not a word."

Lombard looked thoughtfully at the man's twitching face, his dry lips, the fright in his eyes. He remembered the crash of the falling coffee tray. He thought, but did not say, "Oh, yeay?"

Blore spoke—spoke in his hearty bullying official manner.

He said:

"Came into a little something at her death, though? Eh?"

Rogers drew himself up. He said stiffly:

"Miss Brady left us a legacy in recognition of our faithful services. And why not, I'd like to know?"

Lombard said:

"What about yourself, Mr. Blore?"

"What about me?"

"Your name was included in the list."

Blore went purple.

"Landor, you mean? That was the bank robbery—London and Commercial."

Mr. Justice Wargrave stirred. He said:

"I remember. It didn't come before me, but I remember the case. Landor was convicted on your evidence. You were the police officer in charge of the case?"

Blore said:

"I was."

"Landor got penal servitude for life and died in Dartmoor a year later. He was a delicate man."

Blore said:

"He was a crook. It was he who knocked out the night watchman. The case was quite clear against him."

Wargrave said slowly:

"You were complimented, I think, on your able handling of the case."

Blore said sulkily:

"I got my promotion."

He added in a thick voice:

"I was only doing my duty."

Lombard laughed—a sudden ringing laugh. He said:

“What a duty-loving, law-abiding lot we all seem to be! Myself excepted. What about you, doctor—and your little professional mistake? Illegal operation, was it?”

Emily Brent glanced at him in sharp distaste and drew herself away a little.

Dr. Armstrong, very much master of himself, shook his head good-humouredly.

“I’m at a loss to understand the matter,” he said. “The name meant nothing to me when it was spoken. What was it—Clees? Close? I really can’t remember having a patient of that name, or being connected with a death in any way. The thing’s a complete mystery to me. Of course, it’s a long time ago. It might possibly be one of my operation cases in hospital. They come too late, so many of these people. Then, when the patient dies, they always consider it’s the surgeon’s fault.”

He sighed, shaking his head.

He thought:

Drunk—that’s what it was—drunk. . . . And I operated! Nerves all to pieces—hands shaking. I killed her, all right. Poor devil—elderly woman—simple job if I’d been sober. Lucky for me there’s loyalty in our profession. The Sister knew, of course—but she held her tongue. God, it gave me a shock! Pulled me up. But who could have known about it—after all these years?

4

There was a silence in the room. Everybody was looking, covertly or openly, at Emily Brent. It was a minute or two before she became aware of the expectation. Her eyebrows rose on her narrow forehead. She said:

“Are you waiting for me to say something? I have nothing to say.”

The judge said:

“Nothing, Miss Brent?”

“Nothing.”

Her lips closed tightly.

The judge stroked his face. He said mildly:

“You reserve your defence?”

Miss Brent said coldly:

“There is no question of defence. I have always acted in accordance with the dictates of my conscience. I have nothing with which to reproach myself.”

There was an unsatisfied feeling in the air. But Emily Brent was not one to be swayed by public opinion. She sat unyielding.

The judge cleared his throat once or twice. Then he said:

"Our inquiry rests there. Now, Rogers, who else is there on this island besides ourselves and you and your wife?"

"Nobody, sir. Nobody at all."

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure, sir."

Wargrave said:

"I am not yet clear as to the purpose of our Unknown host in getting us to assemble here. But in my opinion this person, whoever he may be, is not sane in the accepted sense of the word.

"He may be dangerous. In my opinion it would be well for us to leave this place as soon as possible. I suggest that we leave to-night."

Rogers said:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but there's no boat on the island."

"No boat at all?"

"No, sir."

"How do you communicate with the mainland?"

"Fred Narracott, he comes over every morning, sir. He brings the bread and the milk and the post, and takes the orders."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"Then in my opinion it would be well if we all left to-morrow morning as soon as Narracott's boat arrives."

There was a chorus of agreement with only one dissentient voice. It was Anthony Marston who disagreed with the majority.

"A bit unsporting, what?" he said. "Ought to ferret out the mystery before we go. Whole thing's like a detective story. Positively thrilling."

The judge said acidly:

"At my time of life, I have no desire for 'thrills,' as you call them."

Anthony said with a grin:

"The legal life's narrowing! I'm all for crime! Here's to it."

He picked up his drink and drank it off at a gulp.

Too quickly, perhaps. He choked—choked badly. His face contorted, turned purple. He gasped for breath—then slid down off his chair, the glass falling from his hand.

CHAPTER V

IT WAS so sudden and so unexpected that it took every one's breath away. They remained stupidly staring at the crumpled figure on the floor.

Then Dr. Armstrong jumped up and went over to him, kneeling beside him. When he raised his head his eyes were bewildered.

He said in a low awe-struck whisper:

"My God! he's dead."

They didn't take it in. Not at once.

Dead? *Dead?* That young Norse God in the prime of his health and strength. Struck down all in a moment. Healthy young men didn't die like that, choking over a whiskey and soda. . . .

No, they couldn't take it in.

Dr. Armstrong was peering into the dead man's face. He sniffed at the blue twisted lips. Then he picked up the glass from which Anthony Marston had been drinking.

General Macarthur said:

"Dead? D'you mean the fellow just choked and—and died?"

The physician said:

"You can call it choking if you like. He died of asphyxiation right enough."

He was sniffing now at the glass. He dipped a finger into the dregs and very cautiously just touched the finger with the tip of his tongue.

His expression altered.

General Macarthur said:

"Never knew a man could die like that—just of a choking fit!"

Emily Brent said in a clear voice:

"In the midst of life we are in death."

Dr. Armstrong stood up. He said brusquely:

"No, a man doesn't die of a mere choking fit. Marston's death wasn't what we call a natural death."

Vera said almost in a whisper:

"Was there—something—in the whiskey?"

Armstrong nodded.

"Yes. Can't say exactly. Everything points to one of the Cyanides. No distinctive smell of Prussic Acid, probably Potassium Cyanide. It acts pretty well instantaneously."

The judge said sharply:

"It was in his glass?"

"Yes."

The doctor strode to the table where the drinks were. He removed the stopper from the whiskey and smelt and tasted it. Then he tasted the soda water. He shook his head.

"They're both all right."

Lombard said:

"You mean—he must have put the stuff in his glass *himself*?"

Armstrong nodded with a curiously dissatisfied expression. He said:

"Seems like it."

Blore said:

"Suicide, eh? That's a queer go."

Vera said slowly:

"You'd never think that *he* would kill himself. He was so alive. He was—oh—enjoying himself! When he came down the hill in his car this evening he looked—he looked—oh, I can't *explain!*"

But they knew what she meant. Anthony Marston, in the height of his youth and manhood, had seemed like a being who was immortal. And now, crumpled and broken, he lay on the floor.

Dr. Armstrong said:

"Is there any possibility other than suicide?"

Slowly every one shook his head. There could be no other explanation. The drinks themselves were untampered with. They had all seen Anthony Marston go across and help himself. It followed therefore that any Cyanide in the drink must have been put there by Anthony Marston himself.

And yet—why should Anthony Marston commit suicide?

Blore said thoughtfully:

"You know, doctor, it doesn't seem right to me. I shouldn't have said Mr. Marston was a suicidal type of gentleman."

Armstrong answered:

"I agree."

2

They had left it like that. What else was there to say?

Together Armstrong and Lombard had carried the inert body of Anthony Marston to his bedroom and had laid him there covered over with a sheet.

When they came downstairs again, the others were standing in a group, shivering a little, though the night was not cold.

Emily Brent said:

"We'd better go to bed. It's late."

It was past twelve o'clock. The suggestion was a wise one—yet every one hesitated. It was as though they clung to each other's company for reassurance.

The judge said:

"Yes, we must get some sleep."

Rogers said:

"I haven't cleared yet—in the dining-room."

Lombard said curtly:

"Do it in the morning."

Armstrong said to him:

"Is your wife all right?"

"I'll go and see, sir."

He returned a minute or two later.

"Sleeping beautiful, she is."

"Good," said the doctor. "Don't disturb her."

"No, sir. I'll just put things straight in the dining-room and make sure everything's locked up right, and then I'll turn in."

He went across the hall into the dining-room.

The others went upstairs, a slow unwilling procession.

If this had been an old house, with creaking wood, and dark shadows, and heavily panelled walls, there might have been an eerie feeling. But this house was the essence of modernity. There were no dark corners—no possible sliding panels—it was flooded with electric light—everything was new and bright and shining. There was nothing hidden in this house, nothing concealed. It had no atmosphere about it.

Somehow, that was the most frightening thing of all. . . .

They exchanged good-nights on the upper landing. Each of them went into his or her own room, and each of them automatically, almost without conscious thought, locked the door. . . .

3

In his pleasant softly tinted room, Mr. Justice Wargrave removed his garments and prepared himself for bed.

He was thinking about Edward Seton.

He remembered Seton very well. His fair hair, his blue eyes, his habit of looking you straight in the face with a pleasant air of straightforwardness. That was what had made so good an impression on the jury.

Llewellyn, for the Crown, had bungled it a bit. He had been over-vehement, had tried to prove too much.

Matthews, on the other hand, for the Defence, had been good. His points had told. His cross-examinations had been deadly. His handling of his client in the witness box had been masterly.

And Seton had come through the ordeal of cross-examination well. He had not got excited or over-vehement. The jury had been impressed. It had seemed to Matthews, perhaps, as though everything had been over bar the shouting.

The judge wound up his watch carefully and placed it by the bed.

He remembered exactly how he had felt sitting there—listening, making notes, appreciating everything, tabulating every scrap of evidence that told against the prisoner.

He'd enjoyed that case! Matthews' final speech had been first-class. Llewellyn, coming after it, had failed to remove the good impression that the defending counsel had made.

And then had come his own summing up. . . .

Carefully, Mr. Justice Wargrave removed his false teeth and dropped them

into a glass of water. The shrunken lips fell in. It was a cruel mouth now, cruel and predatory.

Hooding his eyes, the judge smiled to himself.

He'd cooked Seton's goose all right!

With a slightly rheumatic grunt, he climbed into bed and turned out the electric light.

4

Downstairs in the dining-room, Rogers stood puzzled.

He was staring at the china figures in the centre of the table.

He muttered to himself:

"That's a rum go! I could have sworn there were ten of them."

5

General Macarthur tossed from side to side.

Sleep would not come to him.

In the darkness he kept seeing Arthur Richmond's face.

He'd liked Arthur—he'd been damned fond of Arthur. He'd been pleased that Leslie liked him too.

Leslie was so capricious. Lots of good fellows that Leslie would turn up her nose at and pronounce dull. "Dull!" Just like that.

But she hadn't found Arthur Richmond dull. They'd got on well together from the beginning. They'd talked of plays and music and pictures together. She'd teased him, made fun of him, ragged him. And he, Macarthur, had been delighted at the thought that Leslie took quite a motherly interest in the boy.

Motherly indeed! Damn fool not to remember that Richmond was twenty-eight to Leslie's twenty-nine.

He'd loved Leslie. He could see her now. Her heart-shaped face, and her dancing deep grey eyes, and the brown curling mass of her hair. He'd loved Leslie and he'd believed in her absolutely.

Out there in France, in the middle of all the hell of it, he'd sat thinking of her, taken her picture out of the breast pocket of his tunic.

And then—he'd found out!

It had come about exactly in the way things happened in books. The letter in the wrong envelope. She'd been writing to them both and she'd put her letter to Richmond in the envelope addressed to her husband. Even now, all these years after, he could feel the shock of it—the pain. . . .

God, it had hurt!

And the business had been going on some time. The letter made that clear. Week-ends! Richmond's last leave. . . .

Leslie—Leslie and Arthur!

God damn the fellow! Damn his smiling face, his brisk "Yes, sir." Liar and hypocrite! Stealer of another man's wife!

It had gathered slowly—that cold murderous rage.

He'd managed to carry on as usual—to show nothing. He'd tried to make his manner to Richmond just the same.

Had he succeeded? He thought so. Richmond hadn't suspected. Inequalities of temper were easily accounted for out there, where men's nerves were continually snapping under the strain.

Only young Armitage had looked at him curiously once or twice. Quite a young chap, but he'd had perceptions, that boy.

Armitage, perhaps, had guessed—when the time came.

He'd sent Richmond deliberately to death. Only a miracle could have brought him through unhurt. That miracle didn't happen. Yes, he'd sent Richmond to his death and he wasn't sorry. It had been easy enough. Mistakes were being made all the time, officers being sent to death needlessly. All was confusion, panic. People might say afterwards, "Old Macarthur lost his nerve a bit, made some colossal blunders, sacrificed some of his best men." They couldn't say more.

But young Armitage was different. He'd looked at his commanding officer very oddly. He'd known, perhaps, that Richmond was being deliberately sent to death.

(And after the War was over—had Armitage talked?)

Leslie hadn't known. Leslie had wept for her lover (he supposed) but her weeping was over by the time he'd come back to England. He'd never told her that he'd found her out. They'd gone on together—only, somehow, she hadn't seemed very real any more. And then, three or four years later, she'd got double pneumonia and died.

That had been a long time ago. Fifteen years—sixteen years?

And he'd left the Army and come to live in Devon—bought the sort of little place he'd always meant to have. Nice neighbours—pleasant part of the world. There was a bit of shooting and fishing. He'd gone to church on Sundays. (But not the day that the lesson was read about David putting Uriah in the forefront of the battle. Somehow he couldn't face that. Gave him an uncomfortable feeling.)

Everybody had been very friendly. At first, that is. Later, he'd had an uneasy feeling that people were talking about him behind his back. They eyed him differently, somehow. As though they'd heard something—some lying rumour. . . .

(Armitage? Supposing Armitage had talked?)

He'd avoided people after that—withdrawn into himself. Unpleasant to feel that people were discussing you.

And all so long ago. So—so purposeless now. Leslie had faded into the

distance and Arthur Richmond, too. Nothing of what had happened seemed to matter any more.

It made life lonely, though. He'd taken to shunning his old Army friends. (If Armitage had talked, they'd know about it.)

And now—this evening—a hidden voice had blared out that old hidden story.

Had he dealt with it all right? Kept a stiff upper lip? Betrayed the right amount of feeling—indignation, disgust—but no guilt, no discomfiture? Difficult to tell.

Surely nobody could have taken the accusation seriously. There had been a pack of other nonsense, just as far-fetched. That charming girl—the voice had accused her of drowning a child! Idiotic! Some madman throwing crazy accusations about!

Emily Brent, too—actually a niece of old Tom Brent of the Regiment. It had accused *her* of murder! Any one could see with half an eye that the woman was as pious as could be—the kind that was hand and glove with parsons.

Damned curious business the whole thing! Crazy, nothing less.

Ever since they had got here—when was that? Why, damn it, it was only this afternoon! Seemed a good bit longer than that.

He thought: "I wonder when we shall get away again."

To-morrow, of course, when the motor boat came from the mainland.

Funny, just this minute he didn't want much to get away from the island. . . . To go back to the mainland, back to his little house, back to all the troubles and worries. Through the open window he could hear the waves breaking on the rocks—a little louder now than earlier in the evening. Wind was getting up, too.

He thought: Peaceful sound. Peaceful place. . . .

He thought: Best of an island is once you get there—you can't go any further . . . you've come to the end of things. . . .

He knew, suddenly, that he didn't want to leave the island.

6

Vera Claythorne lay in bed, wide awake, staring up at the ceiling.

The light beside her was on. She was frightened of the dark.

She was thinking:

"Hugo . . . Hugo . . . Why do I feel you're so near to me to-night? . . . Somewhere quite close. . . .

"Where is he really? I don't know. I never shall know. He just went away—right away—out of my life."

It was no good trying not to think of Hugo. He was close to her. She *had* to think of him—to remember . . .

Cornwall . . .

The black rocks, the smooth yellow sand. Mrs. Hamilton, stout, good-humoured. Cyril, whining a little always, pulling at her hand.

"I want to swim out to the rock, Miss Claythorne. Why can't I swim out to the rock?"

Looking up—meeting Hugo's eyes watching her.

The evenings after Cyril was in bed . . .

"Come out for a stroll, Miss Claythorne."

"I think perhaps I will."

The decorous stroll down to the beach. The moonlight—the soft Atlantic air.

And then, Hugo's arms round her.

"I love you. I love you. You know I love you, Vera?"

Yes, she knew.

(Or thought she knew.)

"I can't ask you to marry me. I've not got a penny. It's all I can do to keep myself. Queer, you know, once, for three months I had the chance of being a rich man to look forward to. Cyril wasn't born until three months after Maurice died. If he'd been a girl . . ."

If the child had been a girl, Hugo would have come into everything. He'd been disappointed, he admitted.

"I hadn't built on it, of course. But it was a bit of a knock. Oh, well, luck's luck! Cyril's a nice kid. I'm awfully fond of him." And he was fond of him, too. Always ready to play games or amuse his small nephew. No rancour in Hugo's nature.

Cyril wasn't really strong. A puny child—no stamina. The kind of child, perhaps, who wouldn't live to grow up. . . .

And then—?

"Miss Claythorne, why can't I swim to the rock?"

Irritating whiney repetition.

"It's too far, Cyril."

"But, Miss Claythorne . . ."

Vera got up. She went to the dressing-table and swallowed three aspirins. She thought:

"I wish I had some proper sleeping stuff."

She thought:

"If I were doing away with myself I'd take an overdose of Veronal—something like that—not Cyanidel"

She shuddered as she remembered Anthony Marston's convulsed purple face.

As she passed the mantelpiece, she looked up at the framed doggerel.

Ten little Indian boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self and then there were nine.

She thought to herself:

"It's horrible—*just like us this evening*. . . ."

Why had Anthony Marston wanted to die?

She didn't want to die.

She couldn't imagine wanting to die. . . .

Death was for—the other people. . . .

CHAPTER VI

DR. ARMSTRONG was dreaming. . . .

It was very hot in the operating room. . . .

Surely they'd got the temperature too high? The sweat was rolling down his face. His hands were clammy. Difficult to hold the scalpel firmly. . . .

How beautifully sharp it was. . . .

Easy to do a murder with a knife like that. And of course he *was* doing a murder. . . .

The woman's body looked different. It had been a large unwieldy body. This was a spare meagre body. And the face was hidden.

Who was it that he had to kill?

He couldn't remember. But he *must* know! Should he ask Sister?

Sister was watching him. No, he couldn't ask her. She was suspicious, he could see that.

But who was it on the operating table?

They shouldn't have covered up the face like that. . . .

If he could only see the face. . . .

Ah! that was better. A young probationer was pulling off the handkerchief.

Emily Brent, of course. It was Emily Brent that he had to kill. How malicious her eyes were! Her lips were moving. What was she saying?

"In the midst of life we are in death. . . ."

She was laughing now. No, nurse, don't put the handkerchief back. I've got to see. I've got to give the anaesthetic. Where's the ether? I must have brought the ether with me. What have you done with the ether, Sister? Château Neuf du Pape? Yes, that will do quite as well.

Take the handkerchief away, nurse.

Of course! I knew it all the time! *It's Anthony Marston!* His face is purple and convulsed. But he's not dead—he's laughing. I tell you he's laughing! He's shaking the operating table.

Look out, man, look out. Nurse, steady it—steady it—

With a start Dr. Armstrong woke up. It was morning. Sunlight was pouring into the room.

And some one was leaning over him—shaking him. It was Rogers. Rogers, with a white face, saying: "Doctor—doctor!"

Dr. Armstrong woke up completely.

He sat up in bed. He said sharply:

"What is it?"

"It's the wife, doctor. *I can't get her to wake.* My God! I can't get her to wake. And—and she don't look right to me."

Dr. Armstrong was quick and efficient. He wrapped himself in his dressing-gown and followed Rogers.

He bent over the bed where the woman was lying peacefully on her side. He lifted the cold hand, raised the eyelid. It was some few minutes before he straightened himself and turned from the bed.

Rogers whispered:

"Is—she—is she—?"

He passed a tongue over dry lips.

Armstrong nodded.

"Yes, she's gone."

His eyes rested thoughtfully on the man before him. Then they went to the table by the bed, to the washstand, then back to the sleeping woman.

Rogers said:

"Was it—was it—'er 'eart, doctor?"

Dr. Armstrong was a minute or two before replying. Then he said:

"What was her health like normally?"

Rogers said:

"She was a bit rheumatically."

"Any doctor been attending her recently?"

"Doctor?" Rogers stared. "Not been to a doctor for years—neither of us."

"You'd no reason to believe she suffered from heart trouble?"

"No, doctor. I never knew of anything."

Armstrong said:

"Did she sleep well?"

Now Rogers' eyes evaded his. The man's hands came together and turned and twisted uneasily. He muttered.

"She didn't sleep extra well—no."

The doctor said sharply:

"Did she take things to make her sleep?"

Rogers stared at him, surprised.

"Take things? To make her sleep? Not that I knew of. I'm sure she didn't."

Armstrong went over to the washstand.

There were a certain number of bottles on it. Hair lotion, lavender water,

cascara, glycerine of cucumber for the hands, a mouth wash, tooth paste and some Elliman's.

Rogers helped by pulling out the drawers of the dressing-table. From there they moved on to the chest of drawers. But there was no sign of sleeping draughts or tablets.

Rogers said:

"She didn't have nothing last night, sir, except what you gave her. . . ."

2

When the gong sounded for breakfast at nine o'clock it found every one up and awaiting the summons.

General Macarthur and the judge had been pacing the terrace outside, exchanging desultory comments on the political situation.

Vera Claythorne and Philip Lombard had been up to the summit of the island behind the house. There they had discovered William Henry Blore, standing staring at the mainland.

He said:

"No sign of that motor boat yet. I've been watching for it."

Vera said, smiling:

"Devon's a sleepy county. Things are usually late."

Philip Lombard was looking the other way, out to sea.

He said abruptly:

"What d'you think of the weather?"

Glancing up at the sky, Blore remarked:

"Looks all right to me."

Lombard pursed up his mouth into a whistle.

He said:

"It will come on to blow before the day's out."

Blore said:

"Squally—eh?"

From below them came the boom of a gong.

Philip Lombard said:

"Breakfast? Well, I could do with some."

As they went down the steep slope Blore said to Lombard in a ruminating voice:

"You know, it beats me—why that young fellow wanted to do himself in! I've been worrying about it all night."

Vera was a little ahead. Lombard hung back slightly. He said:

"Got any alternative theory?"

"I'd want some proof. Motive, to begin with. Well off I should say he was."

Emily Brent came out of the drawing-room door to meet them.

She said sharply:

"Is the boat coming?"

"Not yet," said Vera.

They went in to breakfast. There was a vast dish of eggs and bacon on the sideboard and tea and coffee.

Rogers held the door open for them to pass in, then shut it from the outside.

Emily Brent said:

"That man looks ill this morning."

Dr. Armstrong, who was standing by the window, cleared his throat. He said:

"You must excuse any—er—shortcomings this morning. Rogers has had to do the best he can for breakfast single-handed. Mrs. Rogers has—er—not been able to carry on this morning."

Emily Brent said sharply:

"What's the matter with the woman?"

Dr. Armstrong said easily:

"Let us start our breakfast. The eggs will be cold. Afterwards, there are several matters I want to discuss with you all."

They took the hint. Plates were filled, coffee and tea was poured. The meal began.

Discussion of the island was, by mutual consent, tabooed. They spoke instead in a desultory fashion of current events. The news from abroad, events in the world of sport, the latest reappearance of the Loch Ness monster.

Then, when plates were cleared, Dr. Armstrong moved back his chair a little, cleared his throat importantly and spoke.

He said:

"I thought it better to wait until you had had your breakfast before telling you of a sad piece of news. Mrs. Rogers died in her sleep."

There were startled and shocked ejaculations.

Vera exclaimed:

"How awful! Two deaths on this island since we arrived!"

Mr. Justice Wargrave, his eyes narrowed, said in his small precise clear voice:

"H'm—very remarkable—what was the cause of death?"

Armstrong shrugged his shoulders.

"Impossible to say offhand."

"There must be an autopsy?"

"I certainly couldn't give a certificate. I have no knowledge whatsoever of the woman's state of health."

Vera said:

"She was a very nervous-looking creature. And she had a shock last night. It might have been heart failure, I suppose?"

Dr. Armstrong said drily:

"Her heart certainly failed to beat—but what caused it to fail is the question."

One word fell from Emily Brent. It fell hard and clear into the listening group.

"Conscience!" she said.

Armstrong turned to her.

"What exactly do you mean by that, Miss Brent?"

Emily Brent, her lips tight and hard, said:

"You all heard. She was accused, together with her husband, of having deliberately murdered her former employer—an old lady."

"And you think?"

Emily Brent said:

"I think that that accusation was true. You all saw her last night. She broke down completely and fainted. The shock of having her wickedness brought home to her was too much for her. She literally died of fear."

Dr. Armstrong shook his head doubtfully.

"It is a possible theory," he said. "One cannot adopt it without more exact knowledge of her state of health. If there was cardiac weakness—"

Emily Brent said quietly:

"Call it, if you prefer, an Act of God."

Every one looked shocked. Mr. Blore said uneasily:

"That's carrying things a bit far, Miss Brent."

She looked at them with shining eyes. Her chin went up. She said:

"You regard it as impossible that a sinner should be struck down by the wrath of God! I do not!"

The judge stroked his chin. He murmured in a slightly ironic voice:

"My dear lady, in my experience of ill-doing, Providence leaves the work of conviction and chastisement to us mortals—and the process is often fraught with difficulties. There are no short cuts."

Emily Brent shrugged her shoulders.

Blore said sharply:

"What did she have to eat and drink last night after she went up to bed?"

Armstrong said:

"Nothing."

"She didn't take anything? A cup of tea? A drink of water? I'll bet you she had a cup of tea. That sort always does."

"Rogers assures me she had nothing whatsoever."

"Ah," said Blore. "But he *might* say so!"

His tone was so significant that the doctor looked at him sharply.

Philip Lombard said:

"So that's your idea?"

Blore said aggressively:

"Well, why not? We all heard that accusation last night. May be sheer moonshine—just plain lunacy! On the other hand, it may not. Allow for the moment that it's true. Rogers and his missus polished off that old lady. Well, where does that get you? They've been feeling quite safe and happy about it—"

Vera interrupted. In a low voice she said:

"No, I don't think Mrs. Rogers ever felt safe."

Blore looked slightly annoyed at the interruption. "Just like a woman," his glance said.

He resumed:

"That's as may be. Anyway there's no active danger to them as far as they know. Then, last night, some unknown lunatic spills the beans. What happens? The woman cracks—she goes to pieces. Notice how her husband hung over her as she was coming round. Not all husbandly solicitude! Not on your life! He was like a cat on hot bricks. Scared out of his life as to what she might say.

"And there's the position for you! They've done a murder and got away with it. But if the whole thing's going to be raked up, what's going to happen? Ten to one, the woman will give the show away. She hasn't got the nerve to stand up and brazen it out. She's a living danger to her husband, that's what she is. He's all right. *He'll* lie with a straight face till kingdom comes—but he can't be sure of *her*! And if *she* goes to pieces, his neck's in danger! So he slips something into a cup of tea and makes sure that her mouth is shut permanently."

Armstrong said slowly:

"There was no empty cup by her bedside—there was nothing there at all. I looked."

Blore snorted.

"Of course there wouldn't be! First thing he'd do when she'd drunk it would be to take that cup and saucer away and wash it up carefully."

There was a pause. Then General Macarthur said doubtfully:

"It may be so. But I should hardly think it possible that a man would do that—to his wife."

Blore gave a short laugh.

He said:

"When a man's neck's in danger, he doesn't stop to think too much about sentiment."

There was a pause. Before any one could speak, the door opened and Rogers came in.

He said, looking from one to the other:

"Is there anything more I can get you? I'm sorry there was so little toast, but we've run right out of bread. The new bread hasn't come over from the mainland yet."

Mr. Justice Wargrave stirred a little in his chair. He asked:

"What time does the motor boat usually come over?"

"Between seven and eight, sir. Sometimes it's a bit after eight. Don't know what Fred Narracott can be doing this morning. If he's ill he'd send his brother."

Philip Lombard said:

"What's the time now?"

"Ten minutes to ten, sir."

Lombard's eyebrows rose. He nodded slowly to himself.

Rogers waited a minute or two.

General Macarthur spoke suddenly and explosively.

"Sorry to hear about your wife, Rogers. Doctor's just been telling us."

Rogers inclined his head.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

He took up the empty bacon dish and went out.

Again there was a silence.

3

On the terrace outside Philip Lombard said:

"About this motor boat—"

Blore looked at him.

Blore nodded his head.

He said:

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Lombard. I've asked myself the same question. Motor boat ought to have been here nigh on two hours ago. It hasn't come? Why?"

"Found the answer?" asked Lombard.

"It's not an accident—that's what I say. It's part and parcel of the whole business. It's all bound up together."

Philip Lombard said:

"It won't come, you think?"

A voice spoke behind him—a testy impatient voice.

"The motor boat's not coming," he said.

Blore turned his square shoulder slightly and viewed the last speaker thoughtfully.

"You think not too, General?"

General Macarthur said sharply:

"Of course it won't come. We're counting on the motor boat to take us

off the island. That's the meaning of the whole business. *We're not going to leave the island.* . . . None of us will ever leave. . . . It's the end, you see—the end of everything. . . .”

He hesitated, then he said in a low strange voice:

“That's peace—real peace. To come to the end—not to have to go on. . . . Yes, peace. . . .”

He turned abruptly and walked away. Along the terrace, then down the slope towards the sea—obliquely—to the end of the island where loose rocks went out into the water.

He walked a little unsteadily, like a man who was only half awake.

Blore said:

“There goes another one who's balmy! Looks as though it'll end with the whole lot going that way.”

Philip Lombard said:

“I don't fancy *you* will, Blore.”

The ex-Inspector laughed.

“It would take a lot to send me off my head.” He added drily: “And I don't think you'll be going that way either, Mr. Lombard.”

Philip Lombard said:

“I feel quite sane at the minute, thank you.”

4

Dr. Armstrong came out onto the terrace. He stood there hesitating. To his left were Blore and Lombard. To his right was Wargrave, slowly pacing up and down, his head bent down.

Armstrong, after a moment of indecision, turned towards the latter.

But at that moment Rogers came quickly out of the house.

“Could I have a word with you, sir, please?”

Armstrong turned.

He was startled at what he saw.

Rogers' face was working. Its colour was greyish green. His hands shook.

It was such a contrast to his restraint of a few minutes ago that Armstrong was quite taken aback.

“Please, sir, if I could have a word with you. Inside, sir.”

The doctor turned back and re-entered the house with the frenzied butler. He said:

“What's the matter, man? Pull yourself together.”

“In here, sir, come in here.”

He opened the dining-room door. The doctor passed in. Rogers followed him and shut the door behind him.

“Well,” said Armstrong, “what is it?”

The muscles of Rogers' throat were working. He was swallowing. He jerked out:

"There's things going on, sir, that I don't understand."

Armstrong said sharply: "Things? What things?"

"You'll think I'm crazy, sir. You'll say it isn't anything. But it's got to be explained, sir. It's got to be explained. Because it doesn't make any sense."

"Well, man, tell me what it is? Don't go on talking in riddles."

Rogers swallowed again.

He said:

"It's those little figures, sir. In the middle of the table. The little china figures. Ten of them, there were. I'll swear to that, ten of them."

Armstrong said:

"Yes, ten. We counted them last night at dinner."

Rogers came nearer.

"That's just it, sir. Last night, when I was clearing up, there wasn't but nine, sir. I noticed it and thought it queer. But that's all I thought. And now, sir, this morning. I didn't notice when I laid the breakfast. I was upset and all that.

"But now, sir, when I came to clear away. See for yourself if you don't believe me.

"There's only eight, sir! Only eight! It doesn't make sense, does it? Only eight. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

AFTER BREAKFAST, Emily Brent had suggested to Vera Claythorne that they should walk up to the summit again and watch for the boat. Vera had acquiesced.

The wind had freshened. Small white crests were appearing on the sea. There were no fishing boats out—and no sign of the motor boat.

The actual village of Sticklehaven could not be seen, only the hill above it, a jutting out cliff of red rock concealed the actual little bay.

Emily Brent said:

"The man who brought us out yesterday seemed a dependable sort of person. It is really very odd that he should be so late this morning."

Vera did not answer. She was fighting down a rising feeling of panic.

She said to herself angrily:

"You must keep cool. This isn't like you. You've always had excellent nerves."

Aloud she said after a minute or two:

"I wish he would come. I—I want to get away."

Emily Brent said drily:

"I've no doubt we all do."

Vera said:

"It's all so extraordinary. . . . There seems no—no meaning in it all."

The elderly woman beside her said briskly:

"I'm very annoyed with myself for being so easily taken in. Really that letter is absurd when one comes to examine it. But I had no doubts at the time—none at all."

Vera murmured mechanically:

"I suppose not."

"One takes things for granted too much," said Emily Brent.

Vera drew a deep shuddering breath.

She said:

"Do you really think—what you said at breakfast?"

"Be a little more precise, my dear. To what in particular are you referring?"

Vera said in a low voice:

"Do you really think that Rogers and his wife did away with that old lady?"

Emily Brent gazed thoughtfully out to sea. Then she said:

"Personally, I am quite sure of it. What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think."

Emily Brent said:

"Everything goes to support the idea. The way the woman fainted. And the man dropped the coffee tray, remember. Then the way he spoke about it—it didn't ring true. Oh, yes, I'm afraid they did it."

Vera said:

"The way she looked—scared of her own shadow! I've never seen a woman look so frightened. . . . She must have been always haunted by it. . . ."

Miss Brent murmured:

"I remember a text that hung in my nursery as a child. '*Be sure thy sin will find thee out.*' It's very true, that. '*Be sure thy sin will find thee out.*'"

Vera scrambled to her feet. She said:

"But, Miss Brent—Miss Brent—in that case—"

"Yes, my dear?"

"The others? What about the others?"

"I don't quite understand you."

"All the other accusations—they—*they* weren't true? But if it's true about the Rogerses—" She stopped, unable to make her chaotic thought clear.

Emily Brent's brow, which had been frowning perplexedly, cleared.

She said:

"Ah, I understand you now. Well, there is that Mr. Lombard. He admits to having abandoned twenty men to their deaths."

Vera said:

"They were only natives. . . ."

Emily Brent said sharply:

"Black or white, they are our brothers."

Vera thought:

"Our black brothers—our black brothers. Oh, I'm going to laugh. I'm hysterical. I'm not myself. . . ."

Emily Brent continued thoughtfully:

"Of course, some of the other accusations were very far-fetched and ridiculous. Against the judge, for instance, who was only doing his duty in his public capacity. And the ex-Scotland Yard man. My own case, too."

She paused and then went on:

"Naturally, considering the circumstances, I was not going to say anything last night. It was not a fit subject to discuss before gentlemen."

"No?"

Vera listened with interest. Miss Brent continued serenely:

"Beatrice Taylor was in service with me. *Not a nice girl*—as I found out too late. I was very much deceived in her. She had nice manners and was very clean and willing. I was very pleased with her. Of course all that was the sheerest hypocrisy! She was a loose girl with no morals. Disgusting! It was some time before I found out that she was what they call 'in trouble.' " She paused, her delicate nose wrinkling itself in distaste. "It was a great shock to me. Her parents were decent folk, too, who had brought her up very strictly. I'm glad to say they did not condone her behaviour."

Vera said, staring at Miss Brent:

"What happened?"

"Naturally I did not keep her an hour under my roof. No one shall ever say that I condoned immorality."

Vera said in a lower voice:

"What happened—to her?"

Miss Brent said:

"The abandoned creature, not content with having one sin on her conscience, committed a still graver sin. She took her own life."

Vera whispered, horror-struck:

"She killed herself?"

"Yes, she threw herself into the river."

Vera shivered.

She stared at the calm delicate profile of Miss Brent. She said:

"What did you feel like when you knew she'd done that? Weren't you sorry? Didn't you blame yourself?"

Emily Brent drew herself up.

"I? I had nothing with which to reproach myself."

Vera said:

"But if your—hardness—drove her to it."

Emily Brent said sharply:

"Her own action—her own sin—that was what drove her to it. If she had behaved like a decent modest young woman none of this would have happened."

She turned her face to Vera. There was no self-reproach, no uneasiness in those eyes. They were hard and self-righteous. Emily Brent sat on the summit of Indian Island, encased in her own armour of virtue.

The little elderly spinster was no longer slightly ridiculous to Vera.

Suddenly—she was terrible.

2

Dr. Armstrong came out of the dining-room and once more came out on the terrace.

The judge was sitting in a chair now, gazing placidly out to sea.

Lombard and Blore were over to the left, smoking but not talking.

As before, the doctor hesitated for a moment. His eye rested speculatively on Mr. Justice Wargrave. He wanted to consult with some one. He was conscious of the judge's acute logical brain. But nevertheless he wavered. Mr. Justice Wargrave might have a good brain but he was an elderly man. At this juncture, Armstrong felt what was needed was a man of action.

He made up his mind.

"Lombard, can I speak to you for a minute?"

Philip started.

"Of course."

The two men left the terrace. They strolled down the slope towards the water. When they were out of earshot, Armstrong said:

"I want a consultation."

Lombard's eyebrows went up. He said:

"My dear fellow, I've no medical knowledge."

"No, no, I mean as to the general situation."

"Oh, that's different."

Armstrong said:

"Frankly, what do you think of the position?"

Lombard reflected a minute. Then he said:

"It's rather suggestive, isn't it?"

"What are your ideas on the subject of that woman? Do you accept Blore's theory?"

Philip puffed smoke into the air. He said:

"It's perfectly feasible—taken alone."

"Exactly."

Armstrong's tone sounded relieved. Philip Lombard was no fool.

The latter went on:

"That is, accepting the premise that Mr. and Mrs. Rogers have successfully got away with murder in their time. And I don't see why they shouldn't. What do you think they did exactly? Poisoned the old lady?"

Armstrong said slowly:

"It might be simpler than that. I asked Rogers this morning what this Miss Brady had suffered from. His answer was enlightening. I don't need to go into medical details, but in a certain form of cardiac trouble, amyl nitrite is used. When an attack comes on an ampoule of amyl nitrite is broken and it is inhaled. If amyl nitrite were withheld—well, the consequences might easily be fatal."

Philip Lombard said thoughtfully:

"As simple as that. It must have been—rather tempting."

The doctor nodded.

"Yes, no positive action. No arsenic to obtain and administer—nothing definite—just—negation! And Rogers hurried through the night to fetch a doctor and they both felt confident that no one could ever know."

"And, even if any one knew, nothing could ever be proved against them," added Philip Lombard.

He frowned suddenly.

"Of course—that explains a good deal."

Armstrong said, puzzled:

"I beg your pardon."

Lombard said:

"I mean—it explains Indian Island. There are crimes that cannot be brought home to their perpetrators. Instance, the Rogerses'. Another instance, old Wargrave, who committed his murder strictly within the law."

Armstrong said sharply:

"You believe that story?"

Philip Lombard smiled.

"Oh, yes, I believe it. Wargrave murdered Edward Seton all right, murdered him as surely as if he'd stuck a stiletto through him! But he was clever enough to do it from the judge's seat in wig and gown. So in the ordinary way you can't bring his little crime home to him."

A sudden flash passed like lightning through Armstrong's mind.

"*Murder in Hospital. Murder on the Operating Table. Safe—yes, safe as houses!*"

Philip Lombard was saying:

"Hence—Mr. Owen—hence—Indian Island!"

Armstrong drew a deep breath.

"Now we're getting down to it. What's the real purpose of getting us all here?"

Philip Lombard said:

"What do you think?"

Armstrong said abruptly:

"Let's go back a minute to this woman's death. What are the possible theories? Rogers killed her because he was afraid she would give the show away. Second possibility: She lost her nerve and took an easy way out herself."

Philip Lombard said:

"Suicide, eh?"

"What do you say to that?"

Lombard said:

"It could have been—yes—if *it hadn't been for Marston's death*. Two suicides within twelve hours is a little *too* much to swallow! And if you tell me that Anthony Marston, a young bull with no nerves and precious little brains, got the wind up over having mowed down a couple of kids and deliberately put himself out of the way—well, the idea's laughable! And anyway, how did he get hold of the stuff? From all I've ever heard, Potassium Cyanide isn't the kind of stuff you take about with you in your waistcoat pocket. But that's your line of country."

Armstrong said:

"Nobody in their senses carries Potassium Cyanide. It might be done by some one who was going to take a wasps' nest."

"The ardent gardener or landowner, in fact? Again, not Anthony Marston. It strikes me that Cyanide is going to need a bit of explaining. Either Anthony Marston meant to do away with himself before he came here, and therefore came prepared—or else—"

Armstrong prompted him.

"Or else?"

Philip Lombard grinned.

"Why make me say it? When it's on the tip of your own tongue. *Anthony Marston was murdered, of course.*"

3

Dr. Armstrong drew a deep breath.

"And Mrs. Rogers?"

Lombard said slowly:

"I could believe in Anthony's suicide (with difficulty) if it weren't for Mrs. Rogers. I could believe in Mrs. Rogers' suicide (easily) if it weren't for Anthony Marston. I can believe that Rogers put his wife out of the way—if it were not for the unexplained death of Anthony Marston. But what we need is a theory to explain two deaths following rapidly on each other."

Armstrong said:

"I can perhaps give you some help towards that theory."

And he repeated the facts that Rogers had given him about the disappearance of the two little china figures.

Lombard said:

"Yes, little china Indian figures. . . . There were certainly ten last night at dinner. And now there are eight, you say?"

Dr. Armstrong recited:

"Ten little Indian boys going out to dine;
One went and choked himself and then there were nine.

"Nine little Indian boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself and then there were eight."

The two men looked at each other. Philip Lombard grinned and flung away his cigarette.

"Fits too damned well to be a coincidence! Anthony Marston dies of asphyxiation or choking last night after dinner, and Mother Rogers oversleeps herself with a vengeance."

"And therefore?" said Armstrong.

Lombard took him up.

"And therefore another kind of puzzle. The Nigger in the Woodpile! XI Mr. Owen! U. N. Owen. One Unknown Lunatic at Large!"

"Ah!" Armstrong breathed a sigh of relief. "You agree. But you see what it involves? Rogers swore that there was no one but ourselves and he and his wife on the island."

"Rogers is wrong! Or possibly Rogers is lying!"

Armstrong shook his head.

"I don't think he's lying. The man's scared. He's scared nearly out of his senses."

Philip Lombard nodded.

He said:

"No motor boat this morning. That fits in. Mr. Owen's little arrangements again to the fore. Indian Island is to be isolated until Mr. Owen has finished his job."

Armstrong had gone pale. He said:

"You realize—the man must be a raving maniac!"

Philip Lombard said, and there was a new ring in his voice:

"There's one thing Mr. Owen didn't realize."

"What's that?"

"This island's more or less a bare rock. We shall make short work of searching it. We'll soon ferret out U. N. Owen, Esq."

Dr. Armstrong said warningly:

"He'll be dangerous."

Philip Lombard laughed.

"Dangerous? Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? *I'll be dangerous when I get hold of him!*"

He paused and said:

"We'd better rope in Blore to help us. He'll be a good man in a pinch. Better not tell the women. As for the others, the General's ga ga, I think, and old Wargrave's forte is masterly inactivity. The three of us can attend to this job."

CHAPTER VIII

BLORE WAS easily roped in. He expressed immediate agreement with their arguments.

"What you've said about those china figures, sir, makes all the difference. That's crazy, that is! There's only one thing. You don't think this Owen's idea might be to do the job by proxy, as it were?"

"Explain yourself, man."

"Well, I mean like this. After the racket last night this young Mr. Marston gets the wind up and poisons himself. And Rogers, *he* gets the wind up too and bumps off his wife! All according to U. N. O.'s plan."

Armstrong shook his head. He stressed the point about the Cyanide. Blore agreed.

"Yes, I'd forgotten that. Not a natural thing to be carrying about with you. But how did it get into his drink, sir?"

Lombard said:

"I've been thinking about that. Marston had several drinks that night. Between the time he had his last one and the time he finished the one before it, there was quite a gap. During that time his glass was lying about on some table or other. I think—though I can't be sure, it was on the little table near the window. The window was open. Somebody could have slipped a dose of the Cyanide into the glass."

Blore said unbelievably:

"Without our all seeing him, sir?"

Lombard said drily:

"We were all—rather concerned elsewhere."

Armstrong said slowly:

"That's true. We'd all been attacked. We were walking about, moving about the room. Arguing, indignant, intent on our own business. I think it *could* have been done. . . ."

Blore shrugged his shoulders.

"Fact is, it must have been done! Now then, gentlemen, let's make a start. Nobody's got a revolver, by any chance? I suppose that's too much to hope for."

Lombard said:

"I've got one." He patted his pocket.

Blore's eyes opened very wide. He said in an over-casual tone:

"Always carry that about with you, sir?"

Lombard said:

"Usually. I've been in some tight places, you know."

"Oh," said Blore and added: "Well, you've probably never been in a tighter place than you are to-day! If there's a lunatic hiding on this island, he's probably got a young arsenal on him—to say nothing of a knife or dagger or two."

Armstrong coughed.

"You may be wrong there, Blore. Many homicidal lunatics are very quiet, unassuming people. Delightful fellows."

Blore said:

"I don't feel this one is going to be of that kind, Dr. Armstrong."

2

The three men started on their tour of the island.

It proved unexpectedly simple. On the northwest side, towards the coast, the cliffs fell sheer to the sea below, their surface unbroken.

On the rest of the island there were no trees and very little cover. The three men worked carefully and methodically, beating up and down from the highest point to the water's edge, narrowly scanning the least irregularity in the rock which might point to the entrance to a cave. But there were no caves.

They came at last, skirting the water's edge, to where General Macarthur sat looking out to sea. It was very peaceful here with the lap of the waves breaking over the rocks. The old man sat very upright, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

He paid no attention to the approach of the searchers. His oblivion of them made one at least faintly uncomfortable.

Blore thought to himself:

"'Tisn't natural—looks as though he'd gone into a trance or something."

He cleared his throat and said in a would-be conversational tone:

"Nice peaceful spot you've found for yourself, sir."

The General frowned. He cast a quick look over his shoulder. He said:

"There is so little time—so little time. I really must insist that no one disturbs me."

Blore said genially:

"We won't disturb you. We're just making a tour of the island, so to speak. Just wondered, you know, if some one might be hiding on it."

The General frowned and said:

"You don't understand—you don't understand at all. Please go away."

Blore retreated. He said, as he joined the other two:

"He's crazy. . . . It's no good talking to him."

Lombard asked with some curiosity:

"What did he say?"

Blore shrugged his shoulders.

"Something about there being no time and that he didn't want to be disturbed."

Dr. Armstrong frowned.

He murmured:

"I wonder now. . . ."

3

The search of the island was practically completed. The three men stood on the highest point looking over towards the mainland. There were no boats out. The wind was freshening.

Lombard said:

"No fishing boats out. There's a storm coming. Damned nuisance you can't see the village from here. We could signal or do something."

Blore said:

"We might light a bonfire to-night."

Lombard said, frowning:

"The devil of it is that that's all probably been provided for."

"In what way, sir?"

"How do I know? Practical joke, perhaps. We're to be marooned here, no attention is to be paid to signals, etc. Possibly the village has been told there's a wager on. Some damn fool story anyway."

Blore said dubiously:

"Think they'd swallow that?"

Lombard said drily:

"It's easier of belief than the truth! If the village were told that the island was to be isolated until Mr. Unknown Owen had quietly murdered all his guests—do you think they'd believe that?"

Dr. Armstrong said:

"There are moments when I can't believe it myself. And yet—"

Philip Lombard, his lips curling back from his teeth, said:

"And yet—that's just it! You've said it, doctor!"

Blore was gazing down into the water.

He said:

"Nobody could have clambered down here, I suppose?"

Armstrong shook his head.

"I doubt it. It's pretty sheer. And where could he hide?"

Blore said:

"There might be a hole in the cliff. If we had a boat now, we could row round the island."

Lombard said:

"If we had a boat, we'd all be halfway to the mainland by now!"

"True enough, sir."

Lombard said suddenly:

"We can make sure of this cliff. There's only one place where there *could* be a recess—just a little to the right below here. If you fellows can get hold of a rope, you can let me down to make sure."

Blore said:

"Might as well *be* sure. Though it seems absurd—on the face of it! I'll see if I can get hold of something."

He started off briskly down to the house.

Lombard stared up at the sky. The clouds were beginning to mass themselves together. The wind was increasing.

He shot a sideways look at Armstrong. He said:

"You're very silent, doctor. What are you thinking?"

Armstrong said slowly:

"I was wondering exactly how mad old Macarthur was. . . ."

4

Vera had been restless all the morning. She had avoided Emily Brent with a kind of shuddering aversion.

Miss Brent herself had taken a chair just round the corner of the house so as to be out of the wind. She sat there knitting.

Every time Vera thought of her she seemed to see a pale drowned face with seaweed entangled in the hair. . . . A face that had once been pretty—impudently pretty perhaps—and which was now beyond the reach of pity or terror.

And Emily Brent, placid and righteous, sat knitting.

On the main terrace, Mr. Justice Wargrave sat huddled in a porter's chair. His head was poked down well into his neck.

When Vera looked at him, she saw a man standing in the dock—a young man with fair hair and blue eyes and a bewildered, frightened face. Edward Seton. And in imagination she saw the judge's old hands put the black cap on his head and begin to pronounce sentence. . . .

After a while Vera strolled slowly down to the sea. She walked along to-

wards the extreme end of the island where an old man sat staring out to the horizon.

General Macarthur stirred at her approach. His head turned—there was a queer mixture of questioning and apprehension in his look. It startled her. He stared intently at her for a minute or two.

She thought to herself:

"How queer. It's almost as though he *knew*. . . ."

He said:

"Ah! it's you! You've come. . . ."

Vera sat down beside him. She said:

"Do you like sitting here looking out to sea?"

He nodded his head gently.

"Yes," he said. "It's pleasant. It's a good place, I think, to wait."

"To wait?" said Vera sharply. "What are you waiting for?"

He said gently:

"The end. But I think you know that, don't you? It's true, isn't it? We're all waiting for the end."

She said unsteadily:

"What do you mean?"

General Macarthur said gravely:

"*None of us are going to leave the island.* That's the plan. You know it, of course, perfectly. What, perhaps, you can't understand is the relief!"

Vera said wonderingly:

"The relief?"

He said:

"Yes. Of course, you're very young . . . you haven't got to that yet. But it does come! The blessed relief when you know that you've done with it all—that you haven't got to carry the burden any longer. You'll feel that too some day. . . ."

Vera said hoarsely:

"I don't understand you."

Her fingers worked spasmodically. She felt suddenly afraid of this quiet old soldier.

He said musingly:

"You see, I loved Leslie. I loved her very much. . . ."

Vera said questioningly:

"Was Leslie your wife?"

"Yes, my wife. . . . I loved her—and I was very proud of her. She was so pretty—and so gay."

He was silent for a minute or two, then he said:

"Yes, I loved Leslie. That's why I did it."

Vera said:

"You mean—" and paused.

General Macarthur nodded his head gently.

"It's not much good denying it now—not when we're all going to die. *I sent Richmond to his death.* I suppose, in a way, it was murder. Curious. *Murder*—and I've always been such a law-abiding man! But it didn't seem like that at the time. I had no regrets. 'Serves him damned well right!'—that's what I thought. But afterwards—"

In a hard voice, Vera said:

"Well, afterwards?"

He shook his head vaguely. He looked puzzled and a little distressed.

"I don't know. I—don't know. It was all different, you see. I don't know if Leslie ever guessed . . . I don't think so. But you see, I didn't know about her any more. She'd gone far away where I couldn't reach her. And then she died—and I was alone. . . ."

Vera said:

"Alone—alone—" and the echo of her voice came back to her from the rocks.

General Macarthur said:

"You'll be glad, too, when the end comes."

Vera got up. She said sharply:

"I don't know what you mean!"

He said:

"I *know*, my child, I *know*. . . ."

"You don't. You don't understand at all. . . ."

General Macarthur looked out to sea again. He seemed unconscious of her presence behind him.

He said very gently and softly:

"Leslie . . . ?"

5

When Blore returned from the house with a rope coiled over his arm, he found Armstrong where he had left him staring down into the depths.

Blore said breathlessly:

"Where's Mr. Lombard?"

Armstrong said carelessly:

"Gone to test some theory or other. He'll be back in a minute. Look here, Blore, I'm worried."

"I should say we were all worried."

The doctor waved an impatient hand.

"Of course—of course. I don't mean it that way. I'm thinking of old Macarthur."

"What about him, sir?"

Dr. Armstrong said grimly:

"What we're looking for is a madman. *What price Macarthur?*"

Blore said incredulously:

"You mean he's homicidal?"

Armstrong said doubtfully:

"I shouldn't have said so. Not for a minute. But of course I'm not a specialist in mental diseases. I haven't really had any conversation with him—I haven't studied him from that point of view."

Blore said doubtfully:

"Ga ga, yes! But I wouldn't have said—"

Armstrong cut in with a slight effort as of a man who pulls himself together.

"You're probably right! Damn it all, there *must* be some one hiding on the island! Ah! here comes Lombard."

They fastened the rope carefully.

Lombard said:

"I'll help myself all I can. Keep a lookout for a sudden strain on the rope."

After a minute or two, while they stood together watching Lombard's progress, Blore said:

"Climbs like a cat, doesn't he?"

There was something odd in his voice.

Dr. Armstrong said:

"I should think he must have done some mountaineering in his time."

"Maybe."

There was a silence and the ex-Inspector said:

"Funny sort of cove altogether. D'you know what I think?"

"What?"

"He's a wrong 'un!"

Armstrong said doubtfully:

"In what way?"

Blore grunted. Then he said:

"I don't know—exactly. But I wouldn't trust him a yard."

Dr. Armstrong said:

"I suppose he's led an adventurous life."

Blore said:

"I bet some of his adventures have had to be kept pretty dark." He paused and then went on: "Did you happen to bring a revolver along with you, doctor?"

Armstrong stared.

"Me? Good Lord, no. Why should I?"

Blore said:

"*Why did Mr. Lombard?*"

Armstrong said doubtfully:

"I suppose—habit."

Blore snorted.

A sudden pull came on the rope. For some moments they had their hands full. Presently, when the strain relaxed, Blore said:

"There are habits *and* habits! Mr. Lombard takes a revolver to out-of-the-way places, right enough, *and* a primus and a sleeping-bag and a supply of bug powder, no doubt! But habit wouldn't make him bring the whole outfit down here? It's only in books people carry revolvers around as a matter of course."

Dr. Armstrong shook his head perplexedly.

They leaned over and watched Lombard's progress. His search was thorough and they could see at once that it was futile. Presently he came up over the edge of the cliff. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Well," he said. "We're up against it. It's the house or nowhere."

6

The house was easily searched. They went through the few outbuildings first and then turned their attention to the building itself. Mrs. Rogers' yard measure discovered in the kitchen dresser assisted them. But there were no hidden spaces left unaccounted for. Everything was plain and straightforward, a modern structure devoid of concealments. They went through the ground floor first. As they mounted to the bedroom floor, they saw through the landing window Rogers carrying out a tray of cocktails to the terrace.

Philip Lombard said lightly:

"Wonderful animal, the good servant. Carries on with an impassive countenance."

Armstrong said appreciatively:

"Rogers is a first-class butler, I'll say that for him!"

Blore said:

"His wife was a pretty good cook, too. That dinner—last night—"

They turned in to the first bedroom.

Five minutes later they faced each other on the landing. No one hiding—no possible hiding-place.

Blore said:

"There's a little stair here."

Dr. Armstrong said:

"It leads up to the servants' room."

Blore said:

"There must be a place under the roof—for cisterns, water tank, etc. It's the best chance—and the only one!"

And it was then, as they stood there, that they heard the sound from above. A soft furtive footfall overhead.

They all heard it. Armstrong grasped Blore's arm. Lombard held up an admonitory finger.

"Quiet—listen."

It came again—some one moving softly, furtively, overhead.

Armstrong whispered:

"He's actually in the bedroom itself. The room where Mrs. Rogers' body is."

Blore whispered back:

"Of course! Best hiding-place he could have chosen! Nobody likely to go there. Now then—quiet as you can."

They crept stealthily upstairs.

On the little landing outside the door of the bedroom they paused again. Yes, some one was in the room. There was a faint creak from within.

Blore whispered:

"Now."

He flung open the door and rushed in, the other two close behind him.

Then all three stopped dead.

Rogers was in the room, his hands full of garments.

7

Blore recovered himself first. He said:

"Sorry—er—Rogers. Heard some one moving about in here, and thought—well—"

He stopped.

Rogers said:

"I'm sorry, gentlemen. I was just moving my things. I take it there will be no objection if I take one of the vacant guest chambers on the floor below? The smallest room."

It was to Armstrong that he spoke, and Armstrong replied:

"Of course. Of course. Get on with it."

He avoided looking at the sheeted figure lying on the bed.

Rogers said:

"Thank you, sir."

He went out of the room with his arm full of belongings and went down the stairs to the floor below.

Armstrong moved over to the bed and, lifting the sheet, looked down on the peaceful face of the dead woman. There was no fear there now. Just emptiness.

Armstrong said:

"Wish I'd got my stuff here. I'd like to know what drug it was."

Then he turned to the other two.

"Let's get finished. I feel it in my bones we're not going to find anything."

Blore was wrestling with the bolts of a low manhole.

He said:

"That chap moves damned quietly. A minute or two ago we saw him in the garden. None of us heard him come upstairs."

Lombard said:

"I suppose that's why we assumed it must be a stranger moving about up here."

Blore disappeared into a cavernous darkness. Lombard pulled a torch from his pocket and followed.

Five minutes later three men stood on an upper landing and looked at each other. They were dirty and festooned with cobwebs and their faces were grim.

There was no one on the island but their eight selves.

CHAPTER IX

LOMBARD SAID slowly:

"So we've been wrong—wrong all along! Built up a nightmare of superstition and fantasy all because of the coincidence of two deaths!"

Armstrong said gravely:

"And yet, you know, the argument holds. Hang it all, I'm a doctor, I know something about suicides. Anthony Marston wasn't a suicidal type."

Lombard said doubtfully:

"It couldn't, I suppose, have been an accident?"

Blore snorted, unconvinced.

"Damned queer sort of accident," he grunted.

There was a pause, then Blore said:

"About the woman—" and stopped.

"Mrs. Rogers?"

"Yes. It's possible, isn't it, that that might have been an accident?"

Philip Lombard said:

"An accident? In what way?"

Blore looked slightly embarrassed. His red-brick face grew a little deeper in hue. He said, almost blurting out the words:

"Look here, doctor, you did give her some dope, you know."

Armstrong stared at him.

"Dope? What do you mean?"

"Last night. You said yourself you'd give her something to make her sleep."

"Oh, that, yes. A harmless sedative."

"What was it exactly?"

"I gave her a mild dose of trional. A perfectly harmless preparation."

Blore grew redder still. He said:

"Look here—not to mince matters—you didn't give her an overdose, did you?"

Dr. Armstrong said angrily:

"I don't know what you mean."

Blore said:

"It's possible, isn't it, that you may have made a mistake? These things do happen once in a while."

Armstrong said sharply:

"I did nothing of the sort. The suggestion is ridiculous." He stopped and added in a cold biting tone: "Or do you suggest that I gave her an overdose on purpose?"

Philip Lombard said quickly:

"Look here, you two, got to keep our heads. Don't let's start slinging accusations about."

Blore said sullenly:

"I only suggested the doctor had made a mistake."

Dr. Armstrong smiled with an effort. He said, showing his teeth in a somewhat mirthless smile:

"Doctors can't afford to make mistakes of that kind, my friend."

Blore said deliberately:

"It wouldn't be the first you've made—if that gramophone record is to be believed!"

Armstrong went white. Philip Lombard said quickly and angrily to Blore:

"What's the sense of making yourself offensive? We're all in the same boat. We've got to pull together. What about your own pretty little spot of perjury?"

Blore took a step forward, his hands clenched. He said in a thick voice:

"Perjury be damned! That's a foul lie! You may try and shut me up, Mr. Lombard, but there's things I want to know—and one of them is about *you*!"

Lombard's eyebrows rose.

"About me?"

"Yes. I want to know why you brought a revolver down here on a pleasant social visit?"

Lombard said:

"You do, do you?"

"Yes, I do, Mr. Lombard."

Lombard said unexpectedly:

"You know, Blore, you're not nearly such a fool as you look."

"That's as may be. What about that revolver?"

Lombard smiled.

"I brought it because I expected to run into a spot of trouble."

Blore said suspiciously:

"You didn't tell us that last night."

Lombard shook his head.

"You were holding out on us?" Blore persisted.

"In a way, yes," said Lombard.

"Well, come on, out with it."

Lombard said slowly:

"I allowed you all to think that I was asked here in the same way as most of the others. That's not quite true. As a matter of fact I was approached by a little Jewboy—Morris his name was. He offered me a hundred guineas to come down here and keep my eyes open—said I'd got a reputation for being a good man in a tight place."

"Well?" Blore prompted impatiently.

Lombard said with a grin:

"That's all."

Dr. Armstrong said:

"But surely he told you more than that?"

"Oh, no, he didn't. Just shut up like a clam. I could take it or leave it—those were his words. I was hard up. I took it."

Blore looked unconvinced. He said:

"Why didn't you tell us all this last night?"

"My dear man—" Lombard shrugged eloquent shoulders. "How was I to know that last night wasn't exactly the eventuality I was here to cope with? I lay low and told a noncommittal story."

Dr. Armstrong said shrewdly:

"But now—you think differently?"

Lombard's face changed. It darkened and hardened. He said:

"Yes. I believe now that I'm in the same boat as the rest of you. That hundred guineas was just Mr. Owen's little bit of cheese to get me into the trap along with the rest of you."

He said slowly:

"*For we are in a trap*—I'll take my oath on that! Mrs. Rogers' death! Tony Marston's! The disappearing Indian boys on the dinner-table! Oh, yes, Mr. Owen's hand is plainly to be seen—but *where the devil is Mr. Owen himself?*"

Downstairs the gong pealed a solemn call to lunch.

Rogers was standing by the dining-room door. As the three men descended the stairs he moved a step or two forward. He said in a low anxious voice:

"I hope lunch will be satisfactory. There is cold ham and cold tongue, and I've boiled some potatoes. And there's cheese and biscuits and some tinned fruits."

Lombard said:

"Sounds all right. Stores are holding out, then?"

"There is plenty of food, sir—of a tinned variety. The larder is very well stocked. A necessity, that, I should say, sir, on an island where one may be cut off from the mainland for a considerable period."

Lombard nodded.

Rogers murmured as he followed the three men into the dining-room:

"It worries me that Fred Narracott hasn't been over to-day. It's peculiarly unfortunate, as you might say."

"Yes," said Lombard, "peculiarly unfortunate describes it very well."

Miss Brent came into the room. She had just dropped a ball of wool and was carefully rewinding the end of it.

As she took her seat at table she remarked:

"The weather is changing. The wind is quite strong and there are white horses on the sea."

Mr. Justice Wargrave came in. He walked with a slow measured tread. He darted quick looks from under his bushy eyebrows at the other occupants of the dining-room. He said:

"You have had an active morning."

There was a faint malicious pleasure in his voice.

Vera Claythorne hurried in. She was a little out of breath.

She said quickly:

"I hope you didn't wait for me. Am I late?"

Emily Brent said:

"You're not the last. The General isn't here yet."

They sat round the table.

Rogers addressed Miss Brent:

"Will you begin, Madam, or will you wait?"

Vera said:

"General Macarthur is sitting right down by the sea. I don't expect he would hear the gong there and anyway"—she hesitated—"he's a little vague to-day, I think."

Rogers said quickly:

"I will go down and inform him luncheon is ready."

Dr. Armstrong jumped up.

"I'll go," he said. "You others start lunch."

He left the room. Behind him he heard Rogers' voice.

"Will you take cold tongue or cold ham, Madam?"

3

The five people sitting round the table seemed to find conversation difficult. Outside sudden gusts of wind came up and died away.

Vera shivered a little and said:

"There is a storm coming."

Blore made a contribution to the discourse. He said conversationally:

"There was an old fellow in the train from Plymouth yesterday. *He* kept saying a storm was coming. Wonderful how they know weather, these old salts."

Rogers went round the table collecting the meat plates.

Suddenly, with the plates held in his hands, he stopped.

He said in an odd scared voice:

"There's somebody running. . . ."

They could all hear it—running feet along the terrace.

In that minute, they knew—knew without being told. . . .

As by common accord, they all rose to their feet. They stood looking towards the door.

Dr. Armstrong appeared, his breath coming fast.

He said:

"General Macarthur—"

"Dead!" The word burst from Vera explosively.

Armstrong said:

"Yes, he's dead. . . ."

There was a pause—a long pause.

Seven people looked at each other and could find no words to say.

4

The storm broke just as the old man's body was borne in through the door.

The others were standing in the hall.

There was a sudden hiss and roar as the rain came down.

As Blore and Armstrong passed up the stairs with their burden, Vera Claythorne turned suddenly and went into the deserted dining-room.

It was as they had left it. The sweet course stood ready on the sideboard untasted.

Vera went up to the table. She was there a minute or two later when Rogers came softly into the room.

He started when he saw her. Then his eyes asked a question.

He said:

"Oh, Miss, I—I just came to see . . ."

In a loud harsh voice that surprised herself Vera said:

"You're quite right, Rogers. Look for yourself. *There are only seven.* . . ."

General Macarthur had been laid on his bed.

After making a last examination Armstrong left the room and came downstairs. He found the others assembled in the drawing-room.

Miss Brent was knitting. Vera Claythorne was standing by the window looking out at the hissing rain. Blore was sitting squarely in a chair, his hands on his knees. Lombard was walking restlessly up and down. At the far end of the room Mr. Justice Wargrave was sitting in a grandfather chair. His eyes were half closed.

They opened as the doctor came into the room. He said in a clear penetrating voice:

"Well, doctor?"

Armstrong was very pale. He said:

"No question of heart failure or anything like that. Macarthur was hit with a life preserver or some such thing on the back of the head."

A little murmur went round, but the clear voice of the judge was raised once more.

"Did you find the actual weapon used?"

"No."

"Nevertheless you are sure of your facts?"

"I am quite sure."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said quietly:

"We know now exactly where we are."

There was no doubt now who was in charge of the situation. This morning Wargrave had sat huddled in his chair on the terrace refraining from any overt activity. Now he assumed command with the ease born of a long habit of authority. He definitely presided over the court.

Clearing his throat, he once more spoke.

"This morning, gentlemen, whilst I was sitting on the terrace, I was an observer of your activities. There could be little doubt of your purpose. You were searching the island for an unknown murderer?"

"Quite right, sir," said Philip Lombard.

The judge went on.

"You had come, doubtless, to the same conclusion that I had—namely that the deaths of Anthony Marston and Mrs. Rogers were neither accidental nor were they suicides. No doubt you also reached a certain conclusion as to the purpose of Mr. Owen in enticing us to this island?"

Blore said hoarsely:

"He's a madman! A loony."

The judge coughed.

"That almost certainly. But it hardly affects the issue. Our main preoccupation is this—to save our lives."

Armstrong said in a trembling voice:

"There's no one on the island, I tell you. *No one!*"

The judge stroked his jaw.

He said gently:

"In the sense you mean, no. I came to that conclusion early this morning. I could have told you that your search would be fruitless. Nevertheless I am strongly of the opinion that 'Mr. Owen' (to give him the name he himself has adopted) *is* on the island. Very much so. Given the scheme in question which is neither more nor less than the execution of justice upon certain individuals for offences which the law cannot touch, *there is only one way in which that scheme could be accomplished*. Mr. Owen could only come to the island in one way.

"It is perfectly clear. *Mr. Owen is one of us. . . .*"

6

"Oh, no, no, no. . . ."

It was Vera who burst out—almost in a moan. The judge turned a keen eye on her.

He said:

"My dear young lady, this is no time for refusing to look facts in the face. We are all in grave danger. One of us is U. N. Owen. And we do not know which of us. Of the ten people who came to this island three are definitely cleared. Anthony Marston, Mrs. Rogers, and General Macarthur have gone beyond suspicion. There are seven of us left. Of those seven, one is, if I may so express myself, a bogus little Indian boy."

He paused and looked round.

"Do I take it that you all agree?"

Armstrong said:

"It's fantastic—but I suppose you're right."

Blore said:

"Not a doubt of it. And if you ask me, I've a very good idea—"

A quick gesture of Mr. Justice Wargrave's hand stopped him. The judge said quietly:

"We will come to that presently. At the moment all I wish to establish is that we are in agreement on the facts."

Emily Brent, still knitting, said:

"Your argument seems logical. I agree that one of us is possessed by a devil."

Vera murmured:

"I can't believe it. . . . I can't. . . ."

Wargrave said:

"Lombard?"

"I agree, sir, absolutely."

The judge nodded his head in a satisfied manner. He said:

"Now let us examine the evidence. To begin with, is there any reason for suspecting one particular person? Mr. Blore, you have, I think, something to say."

Blore was breathing hard. He said:

"Lombard's got a revolver. He didn't tell the truth—last night. He admits it."

Philip Lombard smiled scornfully.

He said:

"I suppose I'd better explain again."

He did so, telling the story briefly and succinctly.

Blore said sharply:

"What's to prove it? There's nothing to corroborate your story."

The judge coughed.

"Unfortunately," he said, "we are all in that position. There is only our own word to go upon."

He leant forward.

"You have none of you yet grasped what a very peculiar situation this is. To my mind there is only one course of procedure to adopt. Is there any one whom we can definitely eliminate from suspicion on the evidence which is in our possession?"

Dr. Armstrong said quickly:

"I am a well-known professional man. The mere idea that I can be suspected of—"

Again a gesture of the judge's hand arrested a speaker before he finished his speech. Mr. Justice Wargrave said in his small clear voice:

"I, too, am a well-known person! But, my dear sir, that proves less than nothing! Doctors have gone mad before now. Judges have gone mad. So," he added, looking at Blore, "have policemen!"

Lombard said:

"At any rate, I suppose you'll leave the women out of it."

The judge's eyebrows rose. He said in the famous "acid" tone that Counsel knew so well:

"Do I understand you to assert that women are not subject to homicidal mania?"

Lombard said irritably:

"Of course not. But all the same, it hardly seems possible—"

He stopped. Mr. Justice Wargrave still in the same thin sour voice addressed Armstrong.

"I take it, Dr. Armstrong, that a woman would have been physically capable of striking the blow that killed poor Macarthur?"

The doctor said calmly:

"Perfectly capable—given a suitable instrument, such as a rubber truncheon or cosh."

"It would require no undue exertion of force?"

"Not at all."

Mr. Justice Wargrave wriggled his tortoise-like neck. He said:

"The other two deaths have resulted from the administration of drugs. That, no one will dispute, is easily compassed by a person of the smallest physical strength."

Vera cried angrily:

"I think you're mad!"

His eyes turned slowly till they rested on her. It was the dispassionate stare of a man well used to weighing humanity in the balance. She thought:

"He's just seeing me as a—as a specimen. And"—the thought came to her with real surprise—"he doesn't like me much!"

In measured tones the judge was saying:

"My dear young lady, do try and restrain your feelings. I am not accusing you." He bowed to Miss Brent. "I hope, Miss Brent, that you are not offended by my insistence that *all* of us are equally under suspicion?"

Emily Brent was knitting. She did not look up. In a cold voice she said:

"The idea that I should be accused of taking a fellow creature's life—not to speak of the lives of *three* fellow creatures—is, of course, quite absurd to any one who knows anything of my character. But I quite appreciate the fact that we are all strangers to one another and that in those circumstances, nobody can be exonerated without the fullest proof. There is, as I have said, a devil amongst us."

The judge said:

"Then we are agreed. There can be no elimination on the ground of character or position alone."

Lombard said:

"What about Rogers?"

The judge looked at him unblinkingly.

"What about him?"

Lombard said:

"Well, to my mind, Rogers seems pretty well ruled out."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"Indeed, and on what grounds?"

Lombard said:

"He hasn't got the brains for one thing. And for another his wife was one of the victims."

The judge's heavy eyebrows rose once more. He said:

"In my time, young man, several people have come before me accused of the murders of their wives—and have been found guilty."

"Oh! I agree. Wife murder is perfectly possible—almost natural, let's say! But not this particular kind! I can believe in Rogers killing his wife because he was scared of her breaking down and giving him away, or because he'd taken a dislike to her, or because he wanted to link up with some nice little bit rather less long in the tooth. But I can't see him as the lunatic Mr. Owen dealing out crazy justice and starting on his own wife for a crime they both committed."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"You are assuming hearsay to be evidence. We do not know that Rogers and his wife conspired to murder their employer. That may have been a false statement, made so that Rogers should appear to be in the same position as ourselves. Mrs. Rogers' terror last night may have been due to the fact that she realized her husband was mentally unhinged."

Lombard said:

"Well, have it your own way. U. N. Owen is one of us. No exceptions allowed. We all qualify."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"My point is that there can be no exceptions allowed on the score of *character, position, or probability*. What we must now examine is the possibility of eliminating one or more persons on the *facts*. To put it simply, is there among us one or more persons who could not possibly have administered either Cyanide to Anthony Marston, or an overdose of sleeping draught to Mrs. Rogers, and who had no opportunity of striking the blow that killed General Macarthur?"

Blore's rather heavy face lit up. He leant forward.

"Now you're talking, sir!" he said. "That's the stuff! Let's go into it. As regards young Marston I don't think there's anything to be done. It's already been suggested that some one from outside slipped something into the dregs of his glass before he refilled it for the last time. A person actually in the room could have done that even more easily. I can't remember if Rogers was in the room, but any of the rest of us could certainly have done it."

He paused, then went on.

"Now take the woman Rogers. The people who stand out there are her husband and the doctor. Either of them could have done it as easy as winking—"

Armstrong sprang to his feet. He was trembling.

"I protest— This is absolutely uncalled for! I swear that the dose I gave the woman was perfectly—"

"Dr. Armstrong."

The small sour voice was compelling. The doctor stopped with a jerk in the middle of his sentence. The small cold voice went on.

"Your indignation is very natural. Nevertheless you must admit that the facts have got to be faced. Either you or Rogers *could* have administered a fatal dose with the greatest ease. Let us now consider the position of the other people present. What chance had I, had Inspector Blore, had Miss Brent, had Miss Claythorne, had Mr. Lombard of administering poison? Can any one of us be completely and entirely eliminated?" He paused. "I think not."

Vera said angrily:

"I was nowhere near the woman! All of you can swear to that."

Mr. Justice Wargrave waited a minute, then he said:

"As far as my memory serves me the facts were these—will any one please correct me if I make a misstatement? Mrs. Rogers was lifted onto the sofa by Anthony Marston and Mr. Lombard and Dr. Armstrong went to her. He sent Rogers for brandy. There was then a question raised as to where the voice we had just heard had come from. We all went into the next room with the exception of Miss Brent who remained in this room—alone with the unconscious woman."

A spot of colour came into Emily Brent's cheeks. She stopped knitting. She said:

"This is outrageous!"

The remorseless small voice went on.

"When we returned to this room, you, Miss Brent, were bending over the woman on the sofa."

Emily Brent said:

"Is common humanity a criminal offence?"

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"I am only establishing facts. Rogers then entered the room with the brandy which, of course, he could quite well have doctored before entering the room. The brandy was administered to the woman and shortly afterwards her husband and Dr. Armstrong assisted her up to bed where Dr. Armstrong gave her a sedative."

Blore said:

"That's what happened. Absolutely. And that lets out the judge, Mr. Lombard, myself and Miss Claythorne."

His voice was loud and jubilant. Mr. Justice Wargrave, bringing a cold eye to bear upon him, murmured:

"Ah, but does it? We must take into account *every possible eventuality*."

Blore stared. He said:

"I don't get you."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"Upstairs in her room, Mrs. Rogers is lying in bed. The sedative that the doctor has given her begins to take effect. She is vaguely sleepy and acquiescent. Supposing that at that moment there is a tap on the door and some one enters bringing her, shall we say, a tablet, or a draught, with the message that 'the doctor says you're to take this.' Do you imagine for one minute that she would not have swallowed it obediently without thinking twice about it?"

There was a silence. Blore shifted his feet and frowned. Philip Lombard said:

"I don't believe in that story for a minute. Besides none of us left this room for hours afterwards. There was Marston's death and all the rest of it."

The judge said:

"Some one could have left his or her bedroom—later."

Lombard objected:

"But then Rogers would have been up there."

Dr. Armstrong stirred.

"No," he said. "Rogers went downstairs to clear up in the dining-room and pantry. Any one could have gone up to the woman's bedroom then without being seen."

Emily Brent said:

"Surely, doctor, the woman would have been fast asleep by then under the influence of the drug you had administered?"

"In all likelihood, yes. But it is not a certainty. Until you have prescribed for a patient more than once you cannot tell their reaction to different drugs. There is, sometimes, a considerable period before a sedative takes effect. It depends on the personal idiosyncrasy of the patient towards that particular drug."

Lombard said:

"Of course you *would* say that, doctor. Suits your book—eh?"

Again Armstrong's face darkened with anger.

But again that passionless cold little voice stopped the words on his lips.

"No good result can come from recrimination. Facts are what we have to deal with. It is established, I think, that there is a possibility of such a thing as I have outlined occurring. I agree that its probability value is not high; though there again, it depends on who that person might have been. The appearance of Miss Brent or of Miss Claythorne on such an errand would have occasioned no surprise in the patient's mind. I agree that the appearance of myself, or of Mr. Blore, or of Mr. Lombard could have been, to say the

least of it, unusual, but I still think the visit would have been received without the awakening of any real suspicion."

Blore said:

"And that gets us—*where?*"

7

Mr. Justice Wargrave, stroking his lip and looking quite passionless and inhuman, said:

"We have now dealt with the second killing, and have established the fact that no one of us can be completely exonerated from suspicion."

He paused and went on.

"We come now to the death of General Macarthur. That took place this morning. I will ask any one who considers that he or she has an alibi to state it in so many words. I myself will state at once that I have no valid alibi. I spent the morning sitting on the terrace and meditating on the singular position in which we all find ourselves.

"I sat on that chair on the terrace for the whole morning until the gong went, but there were, I should imagine, several periods during the morning when I was quite unobserved and during which it would have been possible for me to walk down to the sea, kill the General, and return to my chair. There is only my word for the fact that I never left the terrace. In the circumstances that is not enough. There must be *proof*."

Blore said:

"I was with Mr. Lombard and Dr. Armstrong all the morning. They'll bear me out."

Dr. Armstrong said:

"You went to the house for a rope."

Blore said:

"Of course, I did. Went straight there and straight back. You know I did."

Armstrong said:

"You were a long time. . . ."

Blore turned crimson.

He said:

"What the hell do you mean by that, Dr. Armstrong?"

Armstrong repeated:

"I only said you were a long time."

"Had to find it, didn't I? Can't lay your hands on a coil of rope all in a minute."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"During Inspector Blore's absence, were you two gentlemen together?"

Armstrong said hotly:

"Certainly. That is, Lombard went off for a few minutes. I remained where I was."

Lombard said with a smile:

"I wanted to test the possibilities of heliographing to the mainland. Wanted to find the best spot. I was only absent a minute or two."

Armstrong nodded. He said:

"That's right. Not long enough to do a murder, I assure you."

The judge said:

"Did either of you two glance at your watches?"

"Well, no."

Philip Lombard said:

"I wasn't wearing one."

The judge said evenly:

"A minute or two is a vague expression."

He turned his head to the upright figure with the knitting lying on her lap.

"Miss Brent?"

Emily Brent said:

"I took a walk with Miss Claythorne up to the top of the island. Afterwards I sat on the terrace in the sun."

The judge said:

"I don't think I noticed you there."

"No, I was round the corner of the house to the east. It was out of the wind there."

"And you sat there till lunch time?"

"Yes."

"Miss Claythorne?"

Vera answered readily and clearly.

"I was with Miss Brent early this morning. After that I wandered about a bit. Then I went down and talked to General Macarthur."

Mr. Justice Wargrave interrupted. He said:

"What time was that?"

Vera for the first time was vague. She said:

"I don't know. About an hour before lunch, I think—or it might have been less."

Blore asked:

"Was it after we'd spoken to him or before?"

Vera said:

"I don't know. He—he was very queer."

She shivered.

"In what way was he queer?" the judge wanted to know.

Vera said in a low voice:

"He said we were all going to die—he said he was waiting for the end. He—he frightened me. . . ."

The judge nodded. He said:

"What did you do next?"

"I went back to the house. Then, just before lunch, I went out again and up behind the house. I've been terribly restless all day."

Mr. Justice Wargrave stroked his chin. He said:

"There remains Rogers. Though I doubt if his evidence will add anything to our sum of knowledge."

Rogers, summoned before the court, had very little to tell. He had been busy all the morning about household duties and with the preparation of lunch. He had taken cocktails onto the terrace before lunch and had then gone up to remove his things from the attic to another room. He had not looked out of the window during the morning and had seen nothing that could have any bearing upon the death of General Macarthur. He would swear definitely that there had been eight china figures upon the dining-table when he laid the table for lunch.

At the conclusion of Rogers' evidence there was a pause.

Mr. Justice Wargrave cleared his throat.

Lombard murmured to Vera Claythorne:

"The summing up will now take place!"

The judge said:

"We have inquired into the circumstances of these three deaths to the best of our ability. Whilst probability in some cases is against certain people being implicated, yet we cannot say definitely that any one person can be considered as cleared of all complicity. I reiterate my positive belief that of the seven persons assembled in this room one is a dangerous and probably insane criminal. There is no evidence before us as to who that person is. All we can do at the present juncture is to consider what measures we can take for communicating with the mainland for help, and in the event of help being delayed (as is only too possible given the state of the weather) what measures we must adopt to ensure our safety.

"I would ask you all to consider this carefully and to give me any suggestions that may occur to you. In the meantime I warn everybody to be upon his or her guard. So far the murderer has had an easy task, since his victims have been unsuspecting. From now on, it is our task to suspect each and every one amongst us. Forewarned is forearmed. Take no risks and be alert to danger. That is all."

Philip Lombard murmured beneath his breath:

"The court will now adjourn. . . ."

CHAPTER X

"Do you believe it?" Vera asked.

She and Philip Lombard sat on the window-sill of the living-room. Outside the rain poured down and the wind howled in great shuddering gusts against the window-panes.

Philip Lombard cocked his head slightly on one side before answering. Then he said:

"You mean, do I believe that old Wargrave is right when he says it's one of us?"

"Yes."

Philip Lombard said slowly:

"It's difficult to say. Logically, you know, he's right, and yet—"

Vera took the words out of his mouth.

"And yet it seems so incredible!"

Philip Lombard made a grimace.

"The whole thing's incredible! But after Macarthur's death there's no more doubt as to one thing. There's no question now of accidents or suicides. It's definitely murder. Three murders up to date."

Vera shivered. She said:

"It's like some awful dream. I keep feeling that things like this *can't* happen!"

He said with understanding:

"I know. Presently a tap will come on the door, and early morning tea will be brought in."

Vera said:

"Oh, how I wish that could happen!"

Philip Lombard said gravely:

"Yes, but it won't! We're all in the dream! And we've got to be pretty much upon our guard from now on."

Vera said, lowering her voice:

"If—if it is one of them—which do you think it is?"

Philip Lombard grinned suddenly. He said:

"I take it you are excepting our two selves? Well, that's all right. I know very well that I'm not the murderer, and I don't fancy that there's anything insane about you, Vera. You strike me as being one of the sanest and most level-headed girls I've come across. I'd stake my reputation on your sanity."

With a slightly wry smile, Vera said:

"Thank you."

He said:

"Come now, Miss Vera Claythorne, aren't you going to return the compliment?"

Vera hesitated a minute, then she said:

"You've admitted, you know, that you don't hold human life particularly sacred, but all the same I can't see you as—as the man who dictated that gramophone record."

Lombard said:

"Quite right. If I were to commit one or more murders it would be solely for what I could get out of them. This mass clearance isn't my line of country. Good, then we'll eliminate ourselves and concentrate on our five fellow prisoners. Which of them is U. N. Owen? Well, at a guess, and with absolutely nothing to go upon, I'd plump for Wargrave!"

"Oh!" Vera sounded surprised. She thought a minute or two and then said, "Why?"

"Hard to say exactly. But to begin with, he's an old man and he's been presiding over courts of law for years. That is to say, he's played God Almighty for a good many months every year. That must go to a man's head eventually. He gets to see himself as all powerful, as holding the power of life and death—and it's possible that his brain might snap and he might want to go one step farther and be Executioner and Judge Extraordinary."

Vera said slowly:

"Yes, I suppose that's *possible*. . . ."

Lombard said:

"Who do you plump for?"

Without any hesitation Vera answered:

"Dr. Armstrong."

Lombard gave a low whistle.

"The doctor, eh? You know, I should have put him last of all."

Vera shook her head.

"Oh, no! Two of the deaths have been poison. That rather points to a doctor. And then you can't get over the fact that the only thing we are absolutely certain Mrs. Rogers had was the sleeping draught that *he* gave her."

Lombard admitted:

"Yes, that's true."

Vera persisted:

"If a doctor went mad, it would be a long time before any one suspected. And doctors overwork and have a lot of strain."

Philip Lombard said:

"Yes, but I doubt if he could have killed Macarthur. He wouldn't have had time during that brief interval when I left him—not, that is, unless he

fairly hared down there and back again, and I doubt if he's in good enough training to do that and show no signs of it."

Vera said:

"He didn't do it then. He had an opportunity later."

"When?"

"When he went down to call the General to lunch."

Philip whistled again very softly. He said:

"So you think he did it then? Pretty cool thing to do."

Vera said impatiently:

"What risk was there? He's the only person here with medical knowledge. He can swear the body's been dead at least an hour and who's to contradict him?"

Philip looked at her thoughtfully.

"You know," he said, "that's a clever idea of yours. I wonder—"

2

"Who is it, Mr. Blore? That's what I want to know. Who is it?"

Rogers' face was working. His hands were clenched round the polishing leather that he held in his hand.

Ex-Inspector Blore said:

"Eh, my lad, that's the question!"

"One of us, 'is lordship said. Which one? That's what I want to know. Who's the fiend in 'uman form?"

"That," said Blore, "is what we all would like to know."

Rogers said shrewdly:

"But you've got an idea, Mr. Blore. You've got an idea, 'aven't you?"

"I may have an idea," said Blore slowly. "But that's a long way from being sure. I may be wrong. All I can say is that if I'm right the person in question is a very cool customer—a very cool customer indeed."

Rogers wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He said hoarsely:

"It's like a bad dream, that's what it is."

Blore said, looking at him curiously:

"Got any ideas yourself, Rogers?"

The butler shook his head. He said hoarsely:

"I don't know. I don't know at all. And that's what's frightening the life out of me. To have no idea . . ."

3

Dr. Armstrong said violently:

"We must get out of here—we must—we must! At all costs!"

Mr. Justice Wargrave looked thoughtfully out of the smoking-room window. He played with the cord of his eyeglasses. He said:

"I do not, of course, profess to be a weather prophet. But I should say that it is very unlikely that a boat could reach us—even if they knew of our plight—under twenty-four hours—and even then only if the wind drops."

Dr. Armstrong dropped his head in his hands and groaned.

He said:

"And in the meantime we may all be murdered in our beds?"

"I hope not," said Mr. Justice Wargrave. "I intend to take every possible precaution against such a thing happening."

It flashed across Dr. Armstrong's mind that an old man like the judge, was far more tenacious of life than a younger man would be. He had often marvelled at that fact in his professional career. Here was he, junior to the judge by perhaps twenty years, and yet with a vastly inferior sense of self-preservation.

Mr. Justice Wargrave was thinking:

"Murdered in our beds! These doctors are all the same—they think in *clichés*. A thoroughly commonplace mind."

The doctor said:

"There have been three victims already, remember."

"Certainly. But you must remember that they were unprepared for the attack. We are forewarned."

Dr. Armstrong said bitterly:

"What can we do? Sooner or later—"

"I think," said Mr. Justice Wargrave, "that there are several things we can do."

Armstrong said:

"We've no idea, even, who it can be—"

The judge stroked his chin and murmured:

"Oh, you know, I wouldn't quite say that."

Armstrong stared at him.

"Do you mean you *know*?"

Mr. Justice Wargrave said cautiously:

"As regards actual evidence, such as is necessary in court, I admit that I have none. But it appears to me, reviewing the whole business, that one particular person is sufficiently clearly indicated. Yes, I think so."

Armstrong stared at him.

He said:

"I don't understand."

Miss Brent was upstairs in her bedroom.

She took up her Bible and went to sit by the window.

She opened it. Then, after a minute's hesitation, she set it aside and went

over to the dressing-table. From a drawer in it she took out a small black-covered notebook.

She opened it and began writing.

"A terrible thing has happened. General Macarthur is dead. (His cousin married Elsie MacPherson.) There is no doubt but that he was murdered. After luncheon the judge made us a most interesting speech. He is convinced that the murderer is one of us. That means that one of us is possessed by a devil. I had already suspected that. Which of us is it? They are all asking themselves that. I alone know. . . ."

She sat for some time without moving. Her eyes grew vague and filmy. The pencil straggled drunkenly in her fingers. In shaking loose capitals she wrote:

THE MURDERER'S NAME IS BEATRICE TAYLOR. . . .

Her eyes closed.

Suddenly, with a start, she awoke. She looked down at the notebook. With an angry exclamation she scored through the vague unevenly scrawled characters of the last sentence.

She said in a low voice:

"Did I write that? Did I? I must be going mad. . . ."

5

The storm increased. The wind howled against the side of the house.

Every one was in the living-room. They sat listlessly huddled together. And, surreptitiously, they watched each other.

When Rogers brought in the tea-tray, they all jumped.

He said:

"Shall I draw the curtains? It would make it more cheerful like."

Receiving an assent to this, the curtains were drawn and the lamps turned on. The room grew more cheerful. A little of the shadow lifted. Surely, by to-morrow, the storm would be over and some one would come—a boat would arrive. . . .

Vera Claythorne said:

"Will you pour out tea, Miss Brent?"

The elder woman replied:

"No, you do it, dear. That tea-pot is so heavy. And I have lost two skeins of my grey knitting-wool. So annoying."

Vera moved to the tea-table. There was a cheerful rattle and clink of china. Normality returned.

Tea! Blessed ordinary everyday afternoon tea! Philip Lombard made a cheery remark. Blore responded. Dr. Armstrong told a humorous story. Mr. Justice Wargrave, who ordinarily hated tea, sipped approvingly.

Into this relaxed atmosphere came Rogers.

And Rogers was upset. He said nervously and at random:

"Excuse me, sir, but does any one know what's become of the bathroom curtain?"

Lombard's head went up with a jerk.

"The bathroom curtain? What the devil do you mean, Rogers?"

"It's gone, sir, clean vanished. I was going round drawing all the curtains and the one in the lav—bathroom wasn't there any longer."

Mr. Justice Wargrave asked:

"Was it there this morning?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

Blore said:

"What kind of a curtain was it?"

"Scarlet oilsilk, sir. It went with the scarlet tiles."

Lombard said:

"And it's gone?"

"Gone, sir."

They stared at each other.

Blore said heavily:

"Well—after all—what of it? It's mad—but so's everything else. Anyway, it doesn't matter. You can't kill anybody with an oilsilk curtain. Forget about it."

Rogers said:

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

He went out, shutting the door behind him.

Inside the room, the pall of fear had fallen anew.

Again, surreptitiously, they watched each other.

6

Dinner came, was eaten, and cleared away. A simple meal, mostly out of tins.

Afterwards, in the living-room, the strain was almost too great to be borne.

At nine o'clock, Emily Brent rose to her feet.

She said:

"I'm going to bed."

Vera said:

"I'll go to bed too."

The two women went up the stairs and Lombard and Blore came with them. Standing at the top of the stairs, the two men watched the women go into their respective rooms and shut the doors. They heard the sound of two bolts being shot and the turning of two keys.

Blore said with a grin:

"No need to tell 'em to lock their doors!"

Lombard said:

"Well, *they*'re all right for the night, at any rate!"

He went down again and the other followed him.

7

The four men went to bed an hour later. They went up together. Rogers, from the dining-room where he was setting the table for breakfast, saw them go up. He heard them pause on the landing above.

Then the judge's voice spoke.

"I need hardly advise you, gentlemen, to lock your doors."

Blore said:

"And, what's more, put a chair under the handle. There are ways of turning locks from the outside."

Lombard murmured:

"My dear Blore, the trouble with you is you know too much!"

The judge said gravely:

"Good-night, gentlemen. May we all meet safely in the morning!"

Rogers came out of the dining-room and slipped halfway up the stairs. He saw four figures pass through four doors and heard the turning of four locks and the shooting of four bolts.

He nodded his head.

"That's all right," he muttered.

He went back into the dining-room. Yes, everything was ready for the morning. His eye lingered on the centre plaque of looking-glass and the seven little china figures.

A sudden grin transformed his face.

He murmured:

"I'll see no one plays tricks to-night, at any rate."

Crossing the room he locked the door to the pantry. Then going through the other door to the hall he pulled the door to, locked it and slipped the key into his pocket.

Then, extinguishing the lights, he hurried up the stairs and into his new bedroom.

There was only one possible hiding-place in it, the tall wardrobe, and he looked into that immediately. Then, locking and bolting the door, he prepared for bed.

He said to himself:

"No more Indian tricks to-night. I've seen to that. . . ."

CHAPTER XI

PHILIP LOMBARD had the habit of waking at daybreak. He did so on this particular morning. He raised himself on an elbow and listened. The wind had somewhat abated but was still blowing. He could hear no sound of rain. . . .

At eight o'clock the wind was blowing more strongly, but Lombard did not hear it. He was asleep again.

At nine-thirty he was sitting on the edge of his bed looking at his watch. He put it to his ear. Then his lips drew back from his teeth in that curious wolf-like smile characteristic of the man.

He said very softly:

"I think the time has come to do something about this."

At twenty-five minutes to ten he was tapping on the closed door of Blore's room.

The latter opened it cautiously. His hair was tousled and his eyes were still dim with sleep.

Philip Lombard said affably:

"Sleeping the clock round? Well, shows you've got an easy conscience."

Blore said shortly:

"What's the matter?"

Lombard answered:

"Anybody called you—or brought you any tea? Do you know what time it is?"

Blore looked over his shoulder at a small travelling clock by his bedside.

He said:

"Twenty-five to ten. Wouldn't have believed I could have slept like that. Where's Rogers?"

Philip Lombard said:

"It's a case of echo answers where?"

"What d'you mean?" asked the other sharply.

Lombard said:

"I mean that Rogers is missing. He isn't in his room or anywhere else. And there's no kettle on and the kitchen fire isn't even lit."

Blore swore under his breath. He said:

"Where the devil can he be? Out on the island somewhere? Wait till I get some clothes on. See if the others know anything."

Philip Lombard nodded. He moved along the line of closed doors.

He found Armstrong up and nearly dressed. Mr. Justice Wargrave, like Blore, had to be roused from sleep. Vera Claythorne was dressed. Emily Brent's room was empty.

The little party moved through the house. Rogers' room, as Philip Lombard had already ascertained, was untenanted. The bed had been slept in, and his razor and sponge and soap were wet.

Lombard said:

"He got up all right."

Vera said in a low voice which she tried to make firm and assured:

"You don't think he's—hiding somewhere—waiting for us?"

Lombard said:

"My dear girl, I'm prepared to think anything of any one! My advice is that we keep together until we find him."

Armstrong said:

"He must be out on the island somewhere."

Blore who had joined them, dressed, but still unshaved, said:

"Where's Miss Brent got to—that's another mystery?"

But as they arrived in the hall, Emily Brent came in through the front door. She had on a mackintosh. She said:

"The sea is as high as ever. I shouldn't think any boat could put out to-day."

Blore said:

"Have you been wandering about the island alone, Miss Brent? Don't you realize that that's an exceedingly foolish thing to do?"

Emily Brent said:

"I assure you, Mr. Blore, that I kept an extremely sharp lookout."

Blore grunted. He said:

"Seen anything of Rogers?"

Miss Brent's eyebrows rose.

"Rogers? No, I haven't seen him this morning. Why?"

Mr. Justice Wargrave, shaved, dressed and with his false teeth in position, came down the stairs. He moved to the open dining-room door. He said:

"Ha, laid the table for breakfast, I see."

Lombard said:

"He might have done that last night."

They all moved inside the room, looking at the neatly set plates and cutlery. At the row of cups on the sideboard. At the felt mats placed ready for the coffee urn.

It was Vera who saw it first. She caught the judge's arm and the grip of her athletic fingers made the old gentleman wince.

She cried out:

"The Indians! Look!"

There were only six china figures in the middle of the table.

2

They found him shortly afterwards.

He was in the little wash-house across the yard. He had been chopping sticks in preparation for lighting the kitchen fire. The small chopper was still in his hand. A bigger chopper, a heavy affair, was leaning against the door—the metal of it stained a dull brown. It corresponded only too well with the deep wound in the back of Rogers' head. . . .

3

"Perfectly clear," said Armstrong. "The murderer must have crept up behind him, swung the chopper once and brought it down on his head as he was bending over."

Blore was busy on the handle of the chopper and the flour sifter from the kitchen.

Mr. Justice Wargrave asked:

"Would it have needed great force, doctor?"

Armstrong said gravely:

"A woman could have done it if that's what you mean." He gave a quick glance round. Vera Claythorne and Emily Brent had retired to the kitchen. "The girl could have done it easily—she's an athletic type. In appearance Miss Brent is fragile looking, but that type of woman has often a lot of wiry strength. And you must remember that any one who's mentally unhinged has a good deal of unsuspected strength."

The judge nodded thoughtfully.

Blore rose from his knees with a sigh. He said:

"No fingerprints. Handle was wiped afterwards."

A sound of laughter was heard—they turned sharply. Vera Claythorne was standing in the yard. She cried out in a high shrill voice, shaken with wild bursts of laughter:

"Do they keep bees on this island? Tell me that. Where do we go for honey? Hal hal"

They stared at her uncomprehendingly. It was as though the sane well-balanced girl had gone mad before their eyes. She went on in that high unnatural voice.

"Don't stare like that! As though you thought I was mad. It's sane enough what I'm asking. Bees, hives, bees! Oh, don't you understand? Haven't you read that idiotic rhyme? It's up in all your bedrooms—put there for you to study! We might have come here straightaway if we'd had sense. *Seven little Indian boys chopping up sticks.* And the next verse. I know the whole thing by heart, I tell you! *Six little Indian boys playing with a hive.* And that's

why I'm asking—do they keep bees on this island?—isn't it funny?—isn't it damned funny . . . ?”

She began laughing wildly again. Dr. Armstrong strode forward. He raised his hand and struck her a flat blow on the cheek.

She gasped, hiccuped—and swallowed. She stood motionless a minute, then she said:

“Thank you . . . I'm all right now.”

Her voice was once more calm and controlled—the voice of the efficient games mistress.

She turned and went across the yard into the kitchen saying: “Miss Brent and I are getting you breakfast. Can you—bring some sticks to light the fire?”

The marks of the doctor's hand stood out red on her cheek.

As she went into the kitchen Blore said:

“Well, you dealt with that all right, doctor.”

Armstrong said apologetically:

“Had to! We can't cope with hysteria on the top of everything else.”

Philip Lombard said:

“She's not a hysterical type.”

Armstrong agreed.

“Oh, no. Good healthy sensible girl. Just the sudden shock. It might happen to anybody.”

Rogers had chopped a certain amount of firewood before he had been killed. They gathered it up and took it into the kitchen. Vera and Emily Brent were busy. Miss Brent was raking out the stove. Vera was cutting the rind off the bacon.

Emily Brent said:

“Thank you. We'll be as quick as we can—say half an hour to three quarters. The kettle's got to boil.”

4

Ex-Inspector Blore said in a low hoarse voice to Philip Lombard:

“Know what I'm thinking?”

Philip Lombard said:

“As you're just about to tell me, it's not worth the trouble of guessing.”

Ex-Inspector Blore was an earnest man. A light touch was incomprehensible to him. He went on heavily:

“There was a case in America. Old gentleman and his wife—both killed with an axe. Middle of the morning. Nobody in the house but the daughter and the maid. Maid, it was proved, couldn't have done it. Daughter was a respectable middle-aged spinster. Seemed incredible. So incredible that they acquitted her. But they never found any other explanation.” He paused. “I thought of that when I saw the axe—and then when I went into the kitchen

and saw her there so neat and calm. Hadn't turned a hair! That girl, coming all over hysterical—well, that's natural—the sort of thing you'd expect—don't you think so?"

Philip Lombard said laconically:

"It might be."

Blore went on.

"But the other! So neat and prim—wrapped up in that apron—Mrs. Rogers' apron, I suppose—saying: 'Breakfast will be ready in half an hour or so.' If you ask me that woman's as mad as a hatter! Lots of elderly spinsters go that way—I don't mean go in for homicide on the grand scale, but go queer in their heads. Unfortunately it's taken her this way. Religious mania—thinks she's God's instrument, something of that kind! She sits in her room, you know, reading her Bible."

Philip Lombard sighed and said:

"That's hardly proof positive of an unbalanced mentality, Blore."

But Blore went on, ploddingly, perseveringly:

"And then she was out—in her mackintosh, said she'd been down to look at the sea."

The other shook his head.

He said:

"Rogers was killed as he was chopping firewood—that is to say first thing when he got up. The Brent wouldn't have needed to wander about outside for hours afterwards. If you ask me, the murderer of Rogers would take jolly good care to be rolled up in bed snoring."

Blore said:

"You're missing the point, Mr. Lombard. If the woman was innocent she'd be too dead scared to go wandering about by herself. She'd only do that *if she knew that she had nothing to fear*. That's to say *if she herself is the criminal*."

Philip Lombard said:

"That's a good point. . . . Yes, I hadn't thought of that."

He added with a faint grin:

"Glad you don't still suspect me."

Blore said rather shamefacedly:

"I did start by thinking of you—that revolver—and the queer story you told—or didn't tell. But I've realized now that that was really a bit too obvious." He paused and said: "Hope you feel the same about me."

Philip said thoughtfully:

"I may be wrong, of course, but I can't feel that you've got enough imagination for this job. All I can say is, if you're the criminal, you're a damned fine actor and I take my hat off to you." He lowered his voice. "Just between ourselves, Blore, and taking into account that we'll probably both be a couple

of stiffs before another day is out, you did indulge in that spot of perjury, I suppose?"

Blore shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He said at last:

"Doesn't seem to make much odds now. Oh, well, here goes. Landor was innocent right enough. The gang had got me squared and between us we got him put away for a stretch. Mind you, I wouldn't admit this—"

"If there were any witnesses," finished Lombard with a grin. "It's just between you and me. Well, I hope you made a tidy bit out of it."

"Didn't make what I should have done. Mean crowd, the Purcell gang. I got my promotion, though."

"And Landor got penal servitude and died in prison."

"I couldn't know he was going to die, could I?" demanded Blore.

"No, that was your bad luck."

"Mine? His, you mean."

"Yours, too. Because, as a result of it, it looks as though your own life is going to be cut unpleasantly short."

"Me?" Blore stared at him. "Do you think I'm going to go the way of Rogers and the rest of them? Not me! I'm watching out for myself pretty carefully, I can tell you."

Lombard said:

"Oh, well—I'm not a betting man. And anyway if you were dead I wouldn't get paid."

"Look here, Mr. Lombard, what do you mean?"

Philip Lombard showed his teeth. He said:

"I mean, my dear Blore, that in my opinion you haven't got a chance!"

"What?"

"Your lack of imagination is going to make you absolutely a sitting target. A criminal of the imagination of U. N. Owen can make rings round you any time he—or she—wants to."

Blore's face went crimson. He demanded angrily:

"And what about you?"

Philip Lombard's face went hard and dangerous.

He said:

"I've a pretty good imagination of my own. I've been in tight places before now and got out of them! I think—I won't say more than that but I *think* I'll get out of this one."

5

The eggs were in the frying-pan. Vera, at the stove, thought to herself:

"Why did I make a hysterical fool of myself? That was a mistake. Keep calm, my girl, keep calm."

After all, she'd always prided herself on her levelheadedness!

"Miss Claythorne was wonderful—kept her head—started off swimming after Cyril at once."

Why think of that now? All that was over—over. . . . Cyril had disappeared long before she got near the rock. She had felt the current take her, sweeping her out to sea. She had let herself go with it—swimming quietly, floating—till the boat arrived at last. . . .

They had praised her courage and her *sang-froid*. . . .

But not Hugo. Hugo had just—looked at her. . . .

God, how it hurt, even now, to think of Hugo. . . .

Where was he? What was he doing? Was he engaged—married?

Emily Brent said sharply:

"Vera, that bacon is burning."

"Oh, sorry, Miss Brent, so it is. How stupid of me."

Emily Brent lifted out the last egg from the sizzling fat.

Vera, putting fresh pieces of bacon in the frying-pan, said curiously:

"You're wonderfully calm, Miss Brent."

Emily Brent said, pressing her lips together:

"I was brought up to keep my head and never to make a fuss."

Vera thought mechanically:

"Repressed as a child. . . . That accounts for a lot. . . ."

She said:

"Aren't you afraid?"

She paused and then added:

"Or don't you mind dying?"

Dying! It was as though a sharp little gimlet had run into the solid congealed mass of Emily Brent's brain. Dying? But *she* wasn't going to die! The others would die—yes—but not she, Emily Brent. This girl didn't understand! Emily wasn't afraid, naturally—none of the Brents were afraid. All her people were Service people. They faced death unflinchingly. They led upright lives just as she, Emily Brent, had led an upright life. . . . She had never done anything to be ashamed of. . . . And so, naturally, *she* wasn't going to die. . . .

"The Lord is mindful of his own." "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day. . . ." It was daylight now—there was no terror. "We shall none of us leave this island." Who had said that? General Macarthur, of course, whose cousin had married Elsie MacPherson. He hadn't seemed to *care*. He had seemed—actually—to *welcome* the ideal Wicked! Almost impious to feel that way. Some people thought so little of death that they actually took their own lives. *Beatrice Taylor*. . . . Last night she had dreamed of Beatrice—dreamt that she was outside pressing her face against the window and moaning, asking to be let in. But

Emily Brent hadn't wanted to let her in. Because, if she did, something terrible would happen. . . .

Emily came to herself with a start. That girl was looking at her very strangely. She said in a brisk voice:

"Everything's ready, isn't it? We'll take the breakfast in."

6

Breakfast was a curious meal. Every one was very polite.

"May I get you some more coffee, Miss Brent?"

"Miss Claythorne, a slice of ham?"

"Another piece of bacon?"

Six people, all outwardly self-possessed and normal.

And within? Thoughts that ran round in a circle like squirrels in a cage. . . .

"What next? What next? Who? Which?"

"Would it work? I wonder. It's worth trying. If there's time. My God, if there's time. . . ."

"Religious mania, that's the ticket. . . . Looking at her, though, you can hardly believe it. . . . Suppose I'm wrong. . . ."

"It's crazy—everything's crazy. I'm going crazy. Wool disappearing—red silk curtains—it doesn't make sense. I can't get the hang of it. . . ."

"The damned fool, he believed every word I said to him. It was easy. . . . I must be careful, though, very careful."

"Six of those little china figures . . . only six—how many will there be by to-night? . . ."

"Who'll have the last egg?"

"Marmalade?"

"Thanks, can I give you some ham?"

Six people, behaving normally at breakfast. . . .

CHAPTER XII

THE MEAL WAS OVER.

Mr. Justice Wargrave cleared his throat. He said in a small authoritative voice:

"It would be advisable, I think, if we met to discuss the situation. Shall we say in half an hour's time in the drawing-room?"

Every one made a sound suggestive of agreement.

Vera began to pile plates together.

She said:

"I'll clear away and wash up."

Philip Lombard said:

"We'll bring the stuff out to the pantry for you."

"Thanks."

Emily Brent, rising to her feet, sat down again. She said:

"Oh, dear."

The judge said:

"Anything the matter, Miss Brent?"

Emily said apologetically:

"I'm sorry. I'd like to help Miss Claythorne, but I don't know how it is.

I feel just a little giddy."

"Giddy, eh?" Dr. Armstrong came towards her. "Quite natural. Delayed shock. I can give you something to—"

"No!"

The word burst from her lips like an exploding shell.

It took every one aback. Dr. Armstrong flushed a deep red.

There was no mistaking the fear and suspicion in her face. He said stiffly:

"Just as you please, Miss Brent."

She said:

"I don't wish to take anything—anything at all. I will just sit here quietly till the giddiness passes off."

They finished clearing away the breakfast things.

Blore said:

"I'm a domestic sort of man. I'll give you a hand, Miss Claythorne."

Vera said: "Thank you."

Emily Brent was left alone sitting in the dining-room.

For a while she heard a faint murmur of voices from the pantry.

The giddiness was passing. She felt drowsy now, as though she could easily go to sleep.

There was a buzzing in her ears—or was it a real buzzing in the room?

She thought:

"It's like a bee—a bumblebee."

Presently she saw the bee. It was crawling up the window-pane.

Vera Claythorne had talked about bees this morning.

Bees and honey. . . .

She liked honey. Honey in the comb, and strain it yourself through a muslin bag. Drip, drip, drip. . . .

There was somebody in the room . . . somebody all wet and dripping. . . . *Beatrice Taylor came from the river.* . . .

She had only to turn her head and she would see her.

But she couldn't turn her head. . . .

If she were to call out . . .

But she couldn't call out. . . .

There was no one else in the house. She was all alone. . . .

She heard footsteps—soft dragging footsteps coming up behind her. The stumbling footsteps of the drowned girl. . . .

There was a wet dank smell in her nostrils. . . .

On the window-pane the bee was buzzing—buzzing. . . .

And then she felt the prick.

The bee sting on the side of her neck. . . .

2

In the drawing-room they were waiting for Emily Brent.

Vera Claythorne said:

“Shall I go and fetch her?”

Blore said quickly:

“Just a minute.”

Vera sat down again. Every one looked inquiringly at Blore.

He said:

“Look here, everybody, my opinion’s this: we needn’t look farther for the author of these deaths than the dining-room at this minute. I’d take my oath that woman’s the one we’re after!”

Armstrong said:

“And the motive?”

“Religious mania. What do you say, doctor?”

Armstrong said:

“It’s perfectly possible. I’ve nothing to say against it. But of course we’ve no proof.”

Vera said:

“She was very odd in the kitchen when we were getting breakfast. Her eyes—” She shivered.

Lombard said:

“You can’t judge her by that. We’re all a bit off our heads by now!”

Blore said:

“There’s another thing. She’s the only one who wouldn’t give an explanation after that gramophone record. Why? Because she hadn’t any to give.”

Vera stirred in her chair. She said:

“That’s not quite true. She told me—afterwards.”

Wargrave said:

“What did she tell you, Miss Claythorne?”

Vera repeated the story of Beatrice Taylor.

Mr. Justice Wargrave observed:

“A perfectly straightforward story. I personally should have no difficulty in accepting it. Tell me, Miss Claythorne, did she appear to be troubled by a sense of guilt or a feeling of remorse for her attitude in the matter?”

"None whatever," said Vera. "She was completely unmoved."

Blore said:

"Hearts as hard as flints, these righteous spinsters! Envy, mostly!"

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"It is now five minutes to eleven. I think we should summon Miss Brent to join our conclave."

Blore said:

"Aren't you going to take any action?"

The judge said:

"I fail to see what action we can take. Our suspicions are, at the moment, only suspicions. I will, however, ask Dr. Armstrong to observe Miss Brent's demeanour very carefully. Let us now go into the dining-room."

They found Emily Brent sitting in the chair in which they had left her. From behind they saw nothing amiss, except that she did not seem to hear their entrance into the room.

And then they saw her face—suffused with blood, with blue lips and staring eyes.

Blore said:

"My God, she's dead!"

3

The small quiet voice of Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"One more of us acquitted—too late!"

Armstrong was bent over the dead woman. He sniffed the lips, shook his head, peered into the eyelids.

Lombard said impatiently:

"How did she die, doctor? She was all right when we left her here!"

Armstrong's attention was riveted on a mark on the right side of the neck.

He said:

"That's the mark of a hypodermic syringe."

There was a buzzing sound from the window. Vera cried:

"Look—a bee—a *bumblebee*. Remember what I said this morning!"

Armstrong said grimly:

"It wasn't that bee that stung her! A human hand held the syringe."

The judge asked:

"What poison was injected?"

Armstrong answered:

"At a guess, one of the Cyanides. Probably Potassium Cyanide, same as Anthony Marston. She must have died almost immediately by asphyxiation."

Vera cried:

"But that *bee*? It can't be *coincidence*?"

Lombard said grimly:

"Oh, no, it isn't coincidence! It's our murderer's touch of local colour! He's a playful beast. Likes to stick to his damnable nursery jingle as closely as possible!"

For the first time his voice was uneven, almost shrill. It was as though even his nerves, seasoned by a long career of hazards and dangerous undertakings, had given out at last.

He said violently:

"It's mad!—absolutely mad—we're all mad!"

The judge said calmly:

"We have still, I hope, our reasoning powers. *Did any one bring a hypodermic syringe to this house?*"

Dr. Armstrong, straightening himself, said in a voice that was not too well assured:

"Yes, I did."

Four pairs of eyes fastened on him. He braced himself against the deep hostile suspicion of those eyes. He said:

"Always travel with one. Most doctors do."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said calmly:

"Quite so. Will you tell us, doctor, where that syringe is now?"

"In the suitcase in my room."

Wargrave said:

"We might, perhaps, verify that fact."

The five of them went upstairs, a silent procession.

The contents of the suitcase were turned out on the floor.

The hypodermic syringe was not there.

4

Armstrong said violently:

"Somebody must have taken it!"

There was silence in the room.

Armstrong stood with his back to the window. Four pairs of eyes were on him, black with suspicion and accusation. He looked from Wargrave to Vera and repeated helplessly—weakly:

"I tell you some one must have taken it."

Blore was looking at Lombard who returned his gaze.

The judge said:

"There are five of us here in this room. *One of us is a murderer.* The position is fraught with grave danger. Everything must be done in order to safeguard the four of us who are innocent. I will now ask you, Dr. Armstrong, what drugs you have in your possession?"

Armstrong replied:

"I have a small medicine case here. You can examine it. You will find

some sleeping stuff—trional and sulphonal tablets—a packet of bromide, bicarbonate of soda, aspirin. Nothing else. I have no Cyanide in my possession.”

The judge said:

“I have, myself, some sleeping tablets—sulphonal, I think they are. I presume they would be lethal if a sufficiently large dose were given. You, Mr. Lombard, have in your possession a revolver.”

Philip Lombard said sharply:

“What if I have?”

“Only this. I propose that the doctor’s supply of drugs, my own sulphonal tablets, your revolver and anything else of the nature of drugs or firearms should be collected together and placed in a safe place. That after this is done, we should each of us submit to a search—both of our persons and of our effects.”

Lombard said:

“I’m damned if I’ll give up my revolver!”

Wargrave said sharply:

“Mr. Lombard, you are a very strongly built and powerful young man, but ex-Inspector Blore is also a man of powerful physique. I do not know what the outcome of a struggle between you would be but I can tell you this. On Blore’s side, assisting him to the best of our ability will be myself, Dr. Armstrong and Miss Claythorne. You will appreciate, therefore, that the odds against you if you choose to resist will be somewhat heavy.”

Lombard threw his head back. His teeth showed in what was almost a snarl.

“Oh, very well then. Since you’ve got it all taped out.”

Mr. Justice Wargrave nodded his head.

“You are a sensible young man. Where is this revolver of yours?”

“In the drawer of the table by my bed.”

“Good.”

“I’ll fetch it.”

“I think it would be desirable if we went with you.”

Philip said with a smile that was still nearer a snarl:

“Suspicious devil, aren’t you?”

They went along the corridor to Lombard’s room.

Philip strode across to the bed-table and jerked open the drawer.

Then he recoiled with an oath.

The drawer of the bed-table was empty.

“Satisfied?” asked Lombard.

He had stripped to the skin and he and his room had been meticulously searched by the other three men. Vera Claythorne was outside in the corridor.

The search proceeded methodically. In turn, Armstrong, the judge and Blore submitted to the same test.

The four men emerged from Blore's room and approached Vera. It was the judge who spoke.

"I hope you will understand, Miss Claythorne, that we can make no exceptions. That revolver must be found. You have, I presume, a bathing dress with you?"

Vera nodded.

"Then I will ask you to go into your room and put it on and then come out to us here."

Vera went into her room and shut the door. She reappeared in under a minute dressed in a tight-fitting silk rucked bathing dress.

Wargrave nodded approval.

"Thank you, Miss Claythorne. Now if you will remain here, we will search your room."

Vera waited patiently in the corridor until they emerged. Then she went in, dressed, and came out to where they were waiting.

The judge said:

"We are now assured of one thing. There are no lethal weapons or drugs in the possession of any of us five. That is one point to the good. We will now place the drugs in a safe place. There is, I think, a silver chest, is there not, in the pantry?"

Blore said:

"That's all very well, but who's to have the key? You, I suppose."

Mr. Justice Wargrave made no reply.

He went down to the pantry and the others followed him. There was a small case there designed for the purpose of holding silver and plate. By the judge's directions, the various drugs were placed in this and it was locked. Then, still on Wargrave's instructions, the chest was lifted into the plate cupboard and this in turn was locked. The judge then gave the key of the chest to Philip Lombard and the key of the cupboard to Blore.

He said:

"You two are the strongest physically. It would be difficult for either of you to get the key from the other. It would be impossible for any of us three to do so. To break open the cupboard—or the plate chest—would be a noisy and cumbrous proceeding and one which could hardly be carried out without attention being attracted to what was going on."

He paused, then went on:

"We are still faced by one very grave problem. *What has become of Mr. Lombard's revolver?*"

Blore said:

"Seems to me its owner is the most likely person to know that."

A white dint showed in Philip Lombard's nostrils. He said:

"You damned pig-headed fool! I tell you it's been stolen from me!"

Wargrave asked:

"When did you see it last?"

"Last night. It was in the drawer when I went to bed—ready in case anything happened."

The judge nodded.

He said:

"It must have been taken this morning during the confusion of searching for Rogers or after his dead body was discovered."

Vera said:

"It must be hidden somewhere about the house. We must look for it."

Mr. Justice Wargrave's finger was stroking his chin. He said:

"I doubt if our search will result in anything. Our murderer has had plenty of time to devise a hiding-place. I do not fancy we shall find that revolver easily."

Blore said forcefully:

"I don't know where the revolver is, but I'll bet I know where something else is—that hypodermic syringe. Follow me."

He opened the front door and led the way round the house.

A little distance away from the dining-room window he found the syringe. Beside it was a smashed china figure—a sixth broken Indian boy.

Blore said in a satisfied voice:

"Only place it could be. After he'd killed her, he opened the window and threw out the syringe and picked up the china figure from the table and followed on with that."

There were no prints on the syringe. It had been carefully wiped.

Vera said in a determined voice:

"Now let us look for the revolver."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"By all means. But in doing so let us be careful to keep together. Remember, if we separate, the murderer gets his chance."

They searched the house carefully from attic to cellars, but without result. The revolver was still missing.

CHAPTER XIII

"One of us . . . One of us . . . One of us . . ."

Three words, endlessly repeated, dinning themselves hour after hour into receptive brains.

Five people—five frightened people. Five people who watched each other, who now hardly troubled to hide their state of nervous tension.

There was little pretence now—no formal veneer of conversation. They were five enemies linked together by a mutual instinct of self-preservation.

And all of them, suddenly, looked less like human beings. They were reverting to more bestial types. Like a wary old tortoise, Mr. Justice Wargrave sat hunched up, his body motionless, his eyes keen and alert. Ex-Inspector Blore looked coarser and clumsier in build. His walk was that of a slow padding animal. His eyes were bloodshot. There was a look of mingled ferocity and stupidity about him. He was like a beast at bay ready to charge its pursuers. Philip Lombard's senses seemed heightened, rather than diminished. His ears reacted to the slightest sound. His step was lighter and quicker, his body was lithe and graceful. And he smiled often, his lips curling back from his long white teeth.

Vera Claythorne was very quiet. She sat most of the time huddled in a chair. Her eyes stared ahead of her into space. She looked dazed. She was like a bird that has dashed its head against glass and that has been picked up by a human hand. It crouches there, terrified, unable to move, hoping to save itself by its immobility.

Armstrong was in a pitiable condition of nerves. He twitched and his hands shook. He lighted cigarette after cigarette and stubbed them out almost immediately. The forced inaction of their position seemed to gall him more than the others. Every now and then he broke out into a torrent of nervous speech.

"We—we shouldn't just sit here doing nothing! There must be *something*—surely, surely, there is *something* that we can do? If we lit a bonfire—"

Blore said heavily:

"In this weather?"

The rain was pouring down again. The wind came in fitful gusts. The depressing sound of the pattering rain nearly drove them mad.

By tacit consent, they had adopted a plan of campaign. They all sat in the big drawing-room. Only one person left the room at a time. The other four waited till the fifth returned.

Lombard said:

"It's only a question of time. The weather will clear. Then we can do something—signal—light fires—make a raft—something!"

Armstrong said with a sudden cackle of laughter:

"A question of time—*time*? We can't afford time! We shall all be dead. . . ."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said, and his small clear voice was heavy with passionate determination:

"Not if we are careful. *We must be very careful.* . . ."

The mid-day meal had been duly eaten—but there had been no conventional formality about it. All five of them had gone to the kitchen. In the larder they had found a great store of tinned foods. They had opened a tin of tongue and two tins of fruit. They had eaten standing round the kitchen table. Then, herding close together, they had returned to the drawing-room—to sit there—sit—watching each other. . . .

And by now the thoughts that ran through their brains were abnormal, feverish, diseased. . . .

"It's Armstrong . . . I saw him looking at me sideways just then . . . his eyes are mad . . . quite mad. . . . Perhaps he isn't a doctor at all. . . . That's it, of course! . . . He's a lunatic, escaped from some doctor's house—pretending to be a doctor. . . . It's true . . . shall I tell them? . . . Shall I scream out? . . . No, it won't do to put him on his guard. . . . Besides he can seem so sane. . . . What time is it? . . . Only a quarter past three! . . . Oh, God, I shall go mad myself. . . . Yes, *it's Armstrong*. . . . He's watching me now. . . ."

"They won't get *me*! I can take care of myself. . . . I've been in tight places before. . . . Where the hell is that revolver? . . . Who took it? . . . Who's got it? . . . Nobody's got it—we know that. We were all searched. . . . Nobody *can* have it. . . . *But some one knows where it is*. . . ."

"They're going mad . . . they'll all go mad. . . . Afraid of death . . . we're all afraid of death . . . I'm afraid of death. . . . Yes, but that doesn't stop death coming. . . . '*The hearse is at the door, sir*.' Where did I read that? The girl . . . I'll watch the girl. Yes, I'll watch the girl. . . ."

"Twenty to four . . . only twenty to four . . . perhaps the clock has stopped. . . . I don't understand—no, I don't understand. . . . This sort of thing can't happen . . . *it is happening*. . . . Why don't we wake up? Wake up—Judgment Day—no, not that! If I could only think. . . . My head—something's happening in my head—it's going to burst—it's going to split. . . . This sort of thing can't happen. . . . What's the time? Oh, God! it's only a quarter to four."

"I must keep my head . . . I must keep my head. . . . If only I keep my head . . . It's all perfectly clear—all worked out. But nobody must suspect. It may do the trick. It must! Which one? That's the question—which one? I think—yes, I rather think—yes—*him*."

When the clock struck five they all jumped.

Vera said:

"Does any one—want tea?"

There was a moment's silence. Blore said:

"I'd like a cup."

Vera rose. She said:

"I'll go and make it. You can all stay here."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said gently:

"I think, my dear young lady, we would all prefer to come and watch you make it."

Vera stared, then gave a short rather hysterical laugh.

She said:

"Of course! You would!"

Five people went into the kitchen. Tea was made and drunk by Vera and Blore. The other three had whiskey—opening a fresh bottle and using a siphon from a nailed up case.

The judge murmured with a reptilian smile:

"We must be very careful. . . ."

They went back again to the drawing-room. Although it was summer the room was dark. Lombard switched on the lights but they did not come on. He said:

"Of course! The engine's not been run to-day since Rogers hasn't been there to see to it."

He hesitated and said:

"We could go out and get it going, I suppose."

Mr. Justice Wargrave said:

"There are packets of candles in the larder, I saw them, better use those."

Lombard went out. The other four sat watching each other.

He came back with a box of candles and a pile of saucers. Five candles were lit and placed about the room.

The time was a quarter to six.

2

At twenty past six, Vera felt that to sit there longer was unbearable. She would go to her room and bathe her aching head and temples in cold water.

She got up and went towards the door. Then she remembered and came back and got a candle out of the box. She lighted it, let a little wax pour into a saucer and stuck the candle firmly to it. Then she went out of the room, shutting the door behind her and leaving the four men inside.

She went up the stairs and along the passage to her room.

As she opened her door, she suddenly halted and stood stock still.

Her nostrils quivered.

The sea . . . The smell of the sea at St. Tredennick . . .

That was it. She could not be mistaken. Of course one smelt the sea on an island anyway, but this was different. It was the smell there had been on the beach that day—with the tide out and the rocks covered with seaweed drying in the sun.

"*Can I swim out to the island, Miss Claythorne?*"

"*Why can't I swim out to the island? . . .*"

Horrid whiny spoilt little brat! If it weren't for him, Hugo would be rich . . . able to marry the girl he loved. . . .

Hugo . . .

Surely—surely—Hugo was beside her? No, waiting for her in the room. . . .

She made a step forward. The draught from the window caught the flame of the candle. It flickered and went out. . . .

In the dark she was suddenly afraid. . . .

"Don't be a fool," Vera Claythorne urged herself. "It's all right. The others are downstairs. All four of them. There's no one in the room. There can't be. You're imagining things, my girl."

But that smell—that smell of the beach at St. Tredennick . . . that wasn't imagined. *It was true.* . . .

And there *was* some one in the room. . . . She had heard something—surely she had heard something. . . .

And then, as she stood there, listening—a cold, clammy hand touched her throat—a wet hand, smelling of the sea. . . .

3

Vera screamed. She screamed and screamed—screams of the utmost terror—wild desperate cries for help.

She did not hear the sounds from below, of a chair being overturned, of a door opening, of men's feet running up the stairs. She was conscious only of supreme terror.

Then, restoring her sanity, lights flickered in the doorway—candles—men hurrying into the room.

"What the devil?" "What's happened?" "Good God, what is it?"

She shuddered, took a step forward, collapsed on the floor.

She was only half aware of some one bending over her, of some one forcing her head down between her knees.

Then at a sudden exclamation, a quick "My God, look at that!" her senses returned. She opened her eyes and raised her head. She saw what it was the men with the candles were looking at.

A broad ribbon of wet seaweed was hanging down from the ceiling. It was that which in the darkness had swayed against her throat. It was that which she had taken for a clammy hand, a drowned hand come back from the dead to squeeze the life out of her! . . .

She began to laugh hysterically. She said:

"It was seaweed—only seaweed—and that's what the smell was. . . ."

And then the faintness came over her once more—waves upon waves of sickness. Again some one took her head and forced it between her knees.

Aeons of time seemed to pass. They were offering her something to drink—pressing the glass against her lips. She smelt brandy.

She was just about to gulp the spirit gratefully down when, suddenly, a warning note—like an alarm bell—sounded in her brain. She sat up, pushing the glass away.

She said sharply:

“Where did this come from?”

Blore’s voice answered. He stared a minute before speaking. He said:

“I got it from downstairs.”

Vera cried:

“I won’t drink it. . . .”

There was a moment’s silence, then Lombard laughed.

He said with appreciation:

“Good for you, Vera! You’ve got your wits about you—even if you have been scared half out of your life. I’ll get a fresh bottle that hasn’t been opened.”

He went swiftly out.

Vera said uncertainly:

“I’m all right now. I’ll have some water.”

Armstrong supported her as she struggled to her feet. She went over to the basin, swaying and clutching at him for support. She let the cold tap run and then filled the glass.

Blore said resentfully:

“That brandy’s all right.”

Armstrong said:

“How do you know?”

Blore said angrily:

“I didn’t put anything in it. That’s what you’re getting at, I suppose.”

Armstrong said:

“I’m not saying you did. You might have done it, or some one might have tampered with the bottle for just this emergency.”

Lombard came swiftly back into the room.

He had a new bottle of brandy in his hands and a corkscrew.

He thrust the sealed bottle under Vera’s nose.

“There you are, my girl. Absolutely no deception.” He peeled off the tin foil and drew the cork. “Lucky there’s a good supply of spirits in the house. Thoughtful of U. N. Owen.”

Vera shuddered violently.

Armstrong held the glass while Philip poured the brandy into it. He said:

“You’d better drink this, Miss Claythorne. You’ve had a nasty shock.”

Vera drank a little of the spirit. The colour came back to her face.

Philip Lombard said with a laugh:

“Well, here’s one murder that hasn’t gone according to plan!”

Vera said almost in a whisper:

"You think—that was what was meant?"

Lombard nodded.

"Expected you to pass out through fright! Some people would have, wouldn't they, doctor?"

Armstrong did not commit himself. He said doubtfully:

"H'm, impossible to say. Young healthy subject—no cardiac weakness. Unlikely. On the other hand—"

He picked up the glass of brandy that Blore had brought. He dipped a finger in it, tasted it gingerly. His expression did not alter. He said dubiously: "H'm, tastes all right."

Blore stepped forward angrily. He said:

"If you're saying that I tampered with that, I'll knock your ruddy block off."

Vera, her wits revived by the brandy, made a diversion by saying:

"Where's the judge?"

The three men looked at each other.

"*That's odd.* . . . Thought he came up with us."

Blore said:

"*So did I.* . . . What about it, doctor? You came up the stairs behind me."

Armstrong said:

"I thought he was following me. . . . Of course, he'd be bound to go slower than we did. He's an old man."

They looked at each other again.

Lombard said:

"It's damned odd. . . ."

Blore cried:

"We must look for him."

He started for the door. The others followed him, Vera last.

As they went down the stairs Armstrong said over his shoulder:

"Of course he *may* have stayed in the living-room. . . ."

They crossed the hall. Armstrong called out loudly:

"Wargrave, Wargrave, where are you?"

There was no answer. A deadly silence filled the house apart from the gentle patter of the rain.

Then, in the entrance to the drawing-room door, Armstrong stopped dead. The others crowded up and looked over his shoulder.

Somebody cried out.

Mr. Justice Wargrave was sitting in his high-backed chair at the end of the room. Two candles burnt on either side of him. But what shocked and startled the onlookers was the fact that he sat there robed in scarlet with a judge's wig upon his head. . . .

Dr. Armstrong motioned to the others to keep back. He himself walked across to the silent staring figure, reeling a little as he walked like a drunken man.

He bent forward, peering into the still face. Then, with a swift movement, he raised the wig. It fell to the floor, revealing the high bald forehead with in the very middle a round stained mark from which something had trickled. . . .

Dr. Armstrong raised the limp hand and felt for the pulse. Then he turned to the others.

He said—and his voice was expressionless, dead, far away:

"He's been shot. . . ."

Blore said:

"God—the revolver!"

The doctor said, still in the same lifeless voice:

"Got him through the head. Instantaneous."

Vera stooped to the wig. She said, and her voice shook with horror:

"Miss Brent's missing grey wool. . . ."

Blore said:

"And the scarlet curtain that was missing from the bathroom. . . ."

Vera whispered:

"So this is what they wanted them for. . . ."

Suddenly Philip Lombard laughed—a high unnatural laugh.

"'Five little Indian boys going in for law; one got in Chancery and then there were four.' That's the end of Mr. Bloody Justice Wargrave. No more pronouncing sentence for him! No more putting on of the black cap! Here's the last time *he'll* ever sit in court! No more summing up and sending innocent men to death. How Edward Seton would laugh if he were here! God, how *he'd* laugh!"

His outburst shocked and startled the others.

Vera cried:

*"Only this morning you said *he* was the one!"*

Philip Lombard's face changed—sobered.

He said in a low voice:

"I know I did. . . . Well, I was wrong. Here's one more of us who's been proved innocent—too late!"

CHAPTER XIV

THEY HAD CARRIED Mr. Justice Wargrave up to his room and laid him on the bed.

Then they had come down again and had stood in the hall looking at each other.

Blore said heavily:

"What do we do now?"

Lombard said briskly:

"Have something to eat. We've got to eat, you know."

Once again they went into the kitchen. Again they opened a tin of tongue. They ate mechanically, almost without tasting.

Vera said:

"I shall never eat tongue again."

They finished the meal. They sat round the kitchen table staring at each other.

Blore said:

"Only four of us now. . . . *Who'll be the next?*"

Armstrong stared. He said, almost mechanically:

"We must be very careful—" and stopped.

Blore nodded.

"That's what *he* said. . . . And now he's dead!"

Armstrong said:

"How did it happen, I wonder?"

Lombard swore. He said:

"A damned clever double cross! That stuff was planted in Miss Claythorne's room and it worked just as it was intended to. Every one dashes up there thinking *she's* being murdered. And so—in the confusion—some one—caught the old boy off his guard."

Blore said:

"Why didn't any one hear the shot?"

Lombard shook his head.

"Miss Claythorne was screaming, the wind was howling, we were running about and calling out. No, it wouldn't be heard." He paused. "But that trick's not going to work again. He'll have to try something else next time."

Blore said:

"He probably will."

There was an unpleasant tone in his voice. The two men eyed each other.

Armstrong said:

"Four of us, and we don't know which . . ."

Blore said:

"I know. . . ."

Vera said:

"I haven't the least doubt. . . ."

Armstrong said slowly:

"I suppose I do know really. . . ."

Philip Lombard said:

"I think I've got a pretty good idea now. . . ."

Again they all looked at each other. . . .

Vera staggered to her feet. She said:

"I feel awful. I must go to bed. . . . I'm dead beat."

Lombard said:

"Might as well. No good sitting watching each other."

Blore said:

"I've no objection. . . ."

The doctor murmured:

"The best thing to do—although I doubt if any of us will sleep."

They moved to the door. Blore said:

"*I wonder where that revolver is now? . . .*"

2

They went up the stairs.

The next move was a little like a scene in a farce.

Each one of the four stood with a hand on his or her bedroom door handle. Then, as though at a signal, each one stepped into the room and pulled the door shut. There were sounds of bolts and locks, of the moving of furniture.

Four frightened people were barricaded in until morning.

3

Philip Lombard drew a breath of relief as he turned from adjusting a chair under the door handle.

He strolled across to the dressing-table.

By the light of the flickering candle he studied his face curiously.

He said softly to himself:

"Yes, this business has got you rattled all right."

His sudden wolf-like smile flashed out.

He undressed quickly.

He went over to the bed, placing his wrist-watch on the table by the bed.

Then he opened the drawer of the table.

He stood there, staring down at the revolver that was inside it. . . .

4

Vera Claythorne lay in bed.

The candle still burned beside her.

As yet she could not summon the courage to put it out.

She was afraid of the dark. . . .

She told herself again and again: "*You're all right until morning. Nothing*

happened last night. Nothing will happen to-night. Nothing can happen. You're locked and bolted in. No one can come near you. . . ."

And she thought suddenly:

"Of course! I can stay here! Stay here locked in! Food doesn't really matter! I can stay here—safely—till help comes! Even if it's a day—or two days. . . ."

Stay here. Yes, but could she stay here? Hour after hour—with no one to speak to, with nothing to do but *think*. . . .

She'd begin to think of Cornwall—of Hugo—of—of what she'd said to Cyril. Horrid whiny little boy, always pestering her. . . .

"Miss Claythorne, why can't I swim out to the rock? I can. I know I can."

Was it her voice that had answered?

"Of course you can, Cyril, really. I know that."

"Can I go then, Miss Claythorne?"

"Well, you see, Cyril, your mother gets so nervous about you. I'll tell you what. To-morrow you can swim out to the rock. I'll talk to your mother on the beach and distract her attention. And then, when she looks for you, there you'll be standing on the rock waving to her! It *will* be a surprise!"

"Oh, good egg, Miss Claythorne! That will be a lark!"

She'd said it now. To-morrow! Hugo was going to Newquay. When he came back—it would be all over. . . .

Yes, but supposing it wasn't? Supposing it went wrong? Cyril might be rescued in time. And then—then he'd say, "*Miss Claythorne said I could.*" Well, what of it? One must take *some* risk! If the worst happened she'd brazen it out. "*How can you tell such a wicked lie, Cyril? Of course I never said any such thing!*" They'd believe her all right. Cyril often told stories. He was an untruthful child. Cyril would know, of course. But that didn't matter. . . . And anyway nothing *would* go wrong. She'd pretend to swim out after him. But she'd arrive too late. . . . Nobody would ever suspect. . . .

Had Hugo suspected? Was that why he had looked at her in that queer far-off way . . . ? Had Hugo known?

Was that why he had gone off after the inquest so hurriedly?

He hadn't answered the one letter she had written to him. . . .

Hugo . . .

Vera turned restlessly in bed. No, no, she mustn't think of Hugo. It hurt too much! That was all over, over and done with. . . . Hugo must be forgotten. . . .

Why, this evening, had she suddenly felt that Hugo was in the room with her?

She stared up at the ceiling, stared at the big black hook in the middle of the room.

She'd never noticed that hook before.

The seaweed had hung from that. . . .

She shivered as she remembered that cold clammy touch on her neck. . . .

She didn't like that hook on the ceiling. It drew your eyes, fascinated you . . . a big black hook. . . .

5

Ex-Inspector Blore sat on the side of his bed.

His small eyes, red-rimmed and bloodshot, were alert in the solid mass of his face. He was like a wild boar waiting to charge.

He felt no inclination to sleep.

The menace was coming very near now. . . . Six out of ten!

For all his sagacity, for all his caution and astuteness, the old judge had gone the way of the rest.

Blore snorted with a kind of savage satisfaction.

"What was it the old geezer had said?"

"We must be very careful. . . ."

Self-righteous smug old hypocrite. Sitting up in court feeling like God Almighty. He'd got his all right. . . . No more being careful for him.

And now there were four of them. The girl, Lombard, Armstrong and himself.

Very soon another of them would go. . . . But it wouldn't be William Henry Blore. He'd see to that all right.

(But the revolver. . . . What about the revolver? That was the disturbing factor—the revolver!)

Blore sat on his bed, his brow furrowed, his little eyes creased and puckered while he pondered the problem of the revolver. . . .

In the silence he could hear the clocks strike downstairs.

Midnight.

He relaxed a little now—even went so far as to lie down on his bed. But he did not undress.

He lay there, thinking. Going over the whole business from the beginning, methodically, painstakingly, as he had been wont to do in his police officer days. It was thoroughness that paid in the end.

The candle was burning down. Looking to see if the matches were within easy reach of his hand, he blew it out.

Strangely enough, he found the darkness disquieting. It was as though a thousand age-old fears awoke and struggled for supremacy in his brain. Faces floated in the air—the judge's face crowned with that mockery of grey wool—the cold dead face of Mrs. Rogers—the convulsed purple face of Anthony Marston. . . .

Another face—pale, spectacled, with a small straw-coloured moustache. . . .

A face he had seen sometime or other—but when? Not on the island. No, much longer ago than that.

Funny, that he couldn't put a name to it. . . . Silly sort of face really—fellow looked a bit of a mug.

Of course!

It came to him with a real shock.

Landor!

Odd to think he'd completely forgotten what Landor looked like. Only yesterday he'd been trying to recall the fellow's face, and hadn't been able to.

And now here it was, every feature clear and distinct, as though he had seen it only yesterday. . . .

Landor had had a wife—a thin slip of a woman with a worried face. There'd been a kid too, a girl about fourteen. For the first time, he wondered what had become of them. . . .

(The revolver. What had become of the revolver? That was much more important. . . .)

The more he thought about it the more puzzled he was. . . . He didn't understand this revolver business. . . .

Somebody in the house had got that revolver. . . .

Downstairs a clock struck one.

Blore's thoughts were cut short. He sat up on the bed, suddenly alert. For he had heard a sound—a very faint sound—somewhere outside his bedroom door.

There was some one moving about in the darkened house.

The perspiration broke out on his forehead. Who was it, moving secretly and silently along the corridors? Some one who was up to no good, he'd bet that!

Noiselessly, in spite of his heavy build, he dropped off the bed and with two strides was standing by the door listening.

But the sound did not come again. Nevertheless Blore was convinced that he was not mistaken. He had heard a footfall just outside his door. The hair rose slightly on his scalp. He knew fear again. . . .

Some one creeping about stealthily in the night. . . .

He listened—but the sound was not repeated.

And now a new temptation assailed him. He wanted, desperately, to go out and investigate. If he could only see who it was prowling about in the darkness.

But to open his door would be the action of a fool. Very likely that was exactly what the other was waiting for. He might even have meant Blore to hear what he had heard, counting on him coming out to investigate.

Blore stood rigid—listening. He could hear sounds everywhere now, cracks,

rustles, mysterious whispers—but his dogged realistic brain knew them for what they were—the creations of his own heated imagination.

And then suddenly he heard something that was *not* imagination. Footsteps, very soft, very cautious, but plainly audible to a man listening with all his ears as Blore was listening.

They came softly along the corridor (both Lombard's and Armstrong's rooms were further from the stair-head than his). They passed his door without hesitating or faltering.

And as they did so, Blore made up his mind.

He meant to see who it was! The footsteps had definitely passed his door going to the stairs. Where was the man going?

When Blore acted, he acted quickly, surprisingly so for a man who looked so heavy and slow. He tiptoed back to the bed, slipped matches into his pocket, detached the plug of the electric lamp by his bed, and picked it up winding the flex round it. It was a chromium affair with a heavy ebonite base—a useful weapon.

He sprinted noiselessly across the room, removed the chair from under the door handle and with precaution unlocked and unbolted the door. He stepped out into the corridor. There was a faint sound in the hall below. Blore ran noiselessly in his stockinged feet to the head of the stairs.

At that moment he realized why it was he had heard all these sounds so clearly. The wind had died down completely and the sky must have cleared. There was faint moonlight coming in through the landing window and it illuminated the hall below.

Blore had an instantaneous glimpse of a figure just passing out through the front door.

In the act of running down the stairs in pursuit, he paused.

Once again, he had nearly made a fool of himself! This was a trap, perhaps, to lure him out of the house!

But what the other man didn't realize was that he had made a mistake, had delivered himself neatly into Blore's hands.

For, of the three tenanted rooms upstairs, *one must now be empty*. All that had to be done was to ascertain *which!*

Blore went swiftly back along the corridor.

He paused first at Dr. Armstrong's door and tapped. There was no answer. He waited a minute, then went on to Philip Lombard's room.

Here the answer came at once.

"Who's there?"

"It's Blore. I don't think Armstrong is in his room. Wait a minute."

He went on to the door at the end of the corridor. Here he tapped again.

"Miss Claythorne. Miss Claythorne."

Vera's voice, startled, answered him.

"Who is it? What's the matter?"

"It's all right, Miss Claythorne. Wait a minute. I'll come back."

He raced back to Lombard's room. The door opened as he did so. Lombard stood there. He held a candle in his left hand. He had pulled on his trousers over his pyjamas. His right hand rested in the pocket of his pyjama jacket. He said sharply:

"What the hell's all this?"

Blore explained rapidly. Lombard's eyes lit up.

"Armstrong—eh? So *he's* our pigeon!" He moved along to Armstrong's door. "Sorry, Blore, but I don't take anything on trust."

He rapped sharply on the panel.

"Armstrong—Armstrong."

There was no answer.

Lombard dropped to his knees and peered through the keyhole. He inserted his little finger gingerly into the lock.

He said:

"Key's not in the door on the inside."

Blore said:

"That means he locked it on the outside and took it with him."

Philip nodded:

"Ordinary precaution to take. *We'll get him, Blore. . . . This time, we'll get him!* Half a second."

He raced along to Vera's room.

"Vera."

"Yes."

"We're hunting Armstrong. He's out of his room. Whatever you do, *don't open your door. Understand?*"

"Yes, I understand."

"If Armstrong comes along and says that I've been killed, or Blore's been killed, *pay no attention. See? Only open your door if both Blore and I speak to you. Got that?*"

Vera said:

"Yes. I'm not a complete fool."

Lombard said:

"Good."

He joined Blore. He said:

"And now—after him! The hunt's up!"

Blore said:

"We'd better be careful. He's got a revolver, remember."

Philip Lombard racing down the stairs chuckled.

He said:

"That's where you're wrong." He undid the front door, remarking: "Latch pushed back—so that he could get in again easily."

He went on:

"I've got that revolver!" He took it half out of his pocket as he spoke. "Found it put back in my drawer to-night."

Blore stopped dead on the doorstep. His face changed. Philip Lombard saw it.

He said impatiently:

"Don't be a damned fool, Blore! I'm not going to shoot you! Go back and barricade yourself in if you like! I'm off after Armstrong."

He started off into the moonlight. Blore, after a minute's hesitation, followed him.

He thought to himself:

"I suppose I'm asking for it. But after all—"

After all he had tackled criminals armed with revolvers before now. Whatever else he lacked, Blore did not lack courage. Show him the danger and he would tackle it pluckily. He was not afraid of danger in the open, only of danger undefined and tinged with the supernatural.

6

Vera, left to wait results, got up and dressed.

She glanced over once or twice at the door. It was a good solid door. It was both bolted and locked and had an oak chair wedged under the handle.

It could not be broken open by force. Certainly not by Dr. Armstrong. He was not a physically powerful man.

If she were Armstrong intent on murder, it was cunning that she would employ, not force.

She amused herself by reflecting on the means he might employ.

He might, as Philip had suggested, announce that one of the other two men was dead. Or he might possibly pretend to be mortally wounded himself, might drag himself groaning to her door.

There were other possibilities. He might inform her that the house was on fire. More, he might actually set the house on fire. . . . Yes, that would be a possibility. Lure the other two men out of the house, then, having previously laid a trail of petrol, he might set light to it. And she, like an idiot, would remain barricaded in her room until it was too late.

She crossed over to the window. Not too bad. At a pinch one could escape that way. It would mean a drop—but there was a handy flower-bed.

She sat down and picking up her diary began to write in it in a clear flowing hand.

One must pass the time.

Suddenly she stiffened to attention. She had heard a sound. It was, she

thought, a sound like breaking glass. And it came from somewhere downstairs.

She listened hard, but the sound was not repeated.

She heard, or thought she heard, stealthy sounds of footsteps, the creak of stairs, the rustle of garments—but there was nothing definite, and she concluded, as Blore had done earlier, that such sounds had their origin in her own imagination.

But presently she heard sounds of a more concrete nature. People moving about downstairs—the murmur of voices. Then the very decided sound of some one mounting the stairs—doors opening and shutting—feet going up to the attics overhead. More noises from there.

Finally the steps came along the passage. Lombard's voice said:

"Vera? You all right?"

"Yes. What's happened?"

Blore's voice said:

"Will you let us in?"

Vera went to the door. She removed the chair, unlocked the door and slid back the bolt. She opened the door. The two men were breathing hard, their feet and the bottom of their trousers were soaking wet.

She said again:

"What's happened?"

Lombard said:

"*Armstrong's disappeared. . . .*"

7

Vera cried:

"What?"

Lombard said:

"Vanished clean off the island."

Blore concurred:

"Vanished—that's the word! Like some damned conjuring trick."

Vera said impatiently:

"Nonsense! He's hiding somewhere!"

Blore said:

"No, he isn't! I tell you, there's nowhere to hide on this island. It's as bare as your hand! There's moonlight outside. As clear as day it is. *And he's not to be found.*"

Vera said:

"He doubled back into the house."

Blore said:

"We thought of that. We've searched the house too. You must have heard us. *He's not here*, I tell you. He's gone—clean vanished, vamoosed. . . ."

Vera said incredulously:

"I don't believe it."

Lombard said:

"It's true, my dear."

He paused and then said:

"There's one other little fact. A pane in the dining-room window has been smashed—and *there are only three little Indian boys on the table.*"

CHAPTER XV

THREE PEOPLE sat eating breakfast in the kitchen.

Outside, the sun shone. It was a lovely day. The storm was a thing of the past.

And with the change in the weather, a change had come in the mood of the prisoners on the island.

They felt now like people just awakening from a nightmare. There was danger, yes, but it was danger in daylight. That paralyzing atmosphere of fear that had wrapped them round like a blanket yesterday while the wind howled outside was gone.

Lombard said:

"We'll try heliographing to-day with a mirror from the highest point of the island. Some bright lad wandering on the cliff will recognize S O S when he sees it, I hope. In the evening we could try a bonfire—only there isn't much wood—and anyway they might just think it was song and dance and merri-ment."

Vera said:

"Surely some one can read Morse. And then they'll come to take us off. Long before this evening."

Lombard said:

"The weather's cleared all right, but the sea hasn't gone down yet. Terrific swell on! They won't be able to get a boat near the island before to-morrow."

Vera cried:

"Another night in this place!"

Lombard shrugged his shoulders.

"May as well face it! Twenty-four hours will do it, I think. If we can last out that, we'll be all right."

Blore cleared his throat. He said:

"We'd better come to a clear understanding. *What's happened to Armstrong?*"

Lombard said:

"Well, we've got one piece of evidence. Only three little Indian boys left on the dinner-table. It looks as though Armstrong had got his quietus."

Vera said:

"Then why haven't you found his dead body?"

Blore said:

"Exactly."

Lombard shook his head. He said:

"It's damned odd—no getting over it."

Blore said doubtfully:

"It might have been thrown into the sea."

Lombard said sharply:

"By whom? You? Me? You saw him go out of the front door. You come along and find me in my room. We go out and search together. When the devil had I time to kill him and carry his body round the island?"

Blore said:

"I don't know. But I do know one thing."

Lombard said:

"What's that?"

Blore said:

"The revolver. It was your revolver. It's in your possession now. There's nothing to show that it hasn't been in your possession all along."

"Come now, Blore, we were all searched."

"Yes, you'd hidden it away before that happened. Afterwards you just took it back again."

"My good blockhead, I swear to you that it was put back in my drawer. Greatest surprise I ever had in my life when I found it there."

Blore said:

"You ask us to believe a thing like that! Why the devil should Armstrong, or any one else for that matter, put it back?"

Lombard raised his shoulders hopelessly.

"I haven't the least idea. It's just crazy. The last thing one would expect. There seems no point in it."

Blore agreed.

"No, there isn't. You might have thought of a better story."

"Rather proof that I'm telling the truth, isn't it?"

"I don't look at it that way."

Philip said:

"You wouldn't."

Blore said:

"Look here, Mr. Lombard, if you're an honest man, as you pretend—"

Philip murmured:

"When did I lay claims to being an honest man? No, indeed, I never said that."

Blore went on stolidly:

"If you're speaking the truth—there's only one thing to be done. As long as you have that revolver, Miss Claythorne and I are at your mercy. The only fair thing is to put that revolver with the other things that are locked up—and you and I will hold the two keys still."

Philip Lombard lit a cigarette.

As he puffed smoke, he said:

"Don't be an ass."

"You won't agree to that?"

"No, I won't. That revolver's mine. I need it to defend myself—and I'm going to keep it."

Blore said:

"In that case we're bound to come to one conclusion."

"That I'm U. N. Owen? Think what you damned well please. But I'll ask you, if that's so, why I didn't pot you with the revolver last night? I could have, about twenty times over."

Blore shook his head.

He said:

"I don't know—and that's a fact. You must have had some reason."

Vera had taken no part in the discussion. She stirred now and said:

"I think you're both behaving like a pair of idiots."

Lombard looked at her.

"What's this?"

Vera said:

"You've forgotten the nursery rhyme. Don't you see there's a clue there?"

She recited in a meaning voice:

"Four little Indian boys going out to sea;

A red herring swallowed one and then there were three."

She went on:

"A *red herring*—that's the vital clue. *Armstrong's not dead*. . . . He took away the china Indian to make you think he was. You may say what you like—Armstrong's on the island still. His disappearance is just a red herring across the track. . . ."

Lombard sat down again.

He said:

"You know, you may be right."

Blore said:

"Yes, but if so, where is he? We've searched the place. Outside and inside."

Vera said scornfully:

"We all searched for the revolver, didn't we, and couldn't find it? But it was somewhere all the time!"

Lombard murmured:

"There's a slight difference in size, my dear, between a man and a revolver."

Vera said:

"I don't care—I'm sure I'm right."

Blore murmured:

"Rather giving himself away, wasn't it? Actually mentioning a red herring in the verse. He could have written it up a bit different."

Vera cried:

"But don't you *see*, he's *mad*? It's all mad! The whole thing of going by the rhyme is mad! Dressing up the judge, killing Rogers when he was chopping sticks—drugging Mrs. Rogers so that she overslept herself—arranging for a bumblebee when Miss Brent died! It's like some horrible child playing a game. It's all got to fit in."

Blore said:

"Yes, you're right." He thought a minute. "At any rate there's no Zoo on the island. He'll have a bit of trouble getting over that."

Vera cried:

"Don't you see? *We're the Zoo*. . . . Last night, we were hardly human any more. *We're the Zoo*. . . ."

2

They spent the morning on the cliffs, taking it in turns to flash a mirror at the mainland.

There were no signs that any one saw them. No answering signals. The day was fine, with a slight haze. Below the sea heaved in a gigantic swell. There were no boats out.

They had made another abortive search of the island. There was no trace of the missing physician.

Vera looked up at the house from where they were standing.

She said, her breath coming with a slight catch in it:

"One feels safer here, out in the open. . . . Don't let's go back into the house again."

Lombard said:

"Not a bad idea. We're pretty safe here, no one can get at us without our seeing him a long time beforehand."

Vera said:

"We'll stay here."

Blore said:

"Have to pass the night somewhere. We'll have to go back to the house then."

Vera shuddered.

"I can't bear it. I *can't* go through another night!"

Philip said:

"You'll be safe enough—locked in your room."

Vera murmured: "I suppose so."

She stretched out her hands, murmuring:

"It's lovely—to feel the sun again. . . ."

She thought:

"How odd. . . . I'm almost happy. And yet I suppose I'm actually in danger. . . . Somehow—now—nothing seems to matter . . . not in daylight. . . . I feel full of power—I feel that I can't die. . . ."

Blore was looking at his wrist-watch. He said:

"It's two o'clock. What about lunch?"

Vera said obstinately:

"I'm not going back to the house. I'm going to stay here—in the open."

"Oh, come now, Miss Claythorne. Got to keep your strength up, you know."

Vera said:

"If I even see a tinned tongue, I shall be sick! I don't want any food. People go days on end with nothing sometimes when they're on a diet."

Blore said:

"Well, I need my meals regular. What about you, Mr. Lombard?"

Philip said:

"You know, I don't relish the idea of tinned tongue particularly. I'll stay here with Miss Claythorne."

Blore hesitated. Vera said:

"I shall be quite all right. I don't think he'll shoot me as soon as your back is turned if that's what you're afraid of."

Blore said:

"It's all right if you say so. But we agreed we ought not to separate."

Philip said:

"You're the one who wants to go into the lion's den. I'll come with you if you like?"

"No, you won't," said Blore. "You'll stay here."

Philip laughed.

"So you're still afraid of me? Why, I could shoot you both this very minute if I liked."

Blore said:

"Yes, but that wouldn't be according to plan. It's one at a time, and it's got to be done in a certain way."

"Well," said Philip, "you seem to know all about it."

"Of course," said Blore, "it's a bit jumpy going up to the house alone—"

Philip said softly:

"And therefore, *will I lend you my revolver?* Answer, no, I will *not!* Not quite so simple as that, thank you."

Blore shrugged his shoulders and began to make his way up the steep slope to the house.

Lombard said softly:

"Feeding time at the Zoo! The animals are very regular in their habits!"

Vera said anxiously:

"Isn't it very risky, what he's doing?"

"In the sense you mean—no, I don't think it is! Armstrong's not armed, you know, and anyway Blore is twice a match for him in physique and he's very much on his guard. And anyway it's a sheer impossibility that Armstrong can be in the house. I *know* he's not there."

"But—what other solution is there?"

Philip said softly:

"There's Blore."

"Oh—do you really think—?"

"Listen, my girl. You heard Blore's story. You've got to admit that if it's true, *I can't possibly have had anything to do with Armstrong's disappearance.* His story clears me. *But it doesn't clear him.* We've only *his* word for it that he heard footsteps and saw a man going downstairs and out at the front door. The whole thing may be a lie. He may have got rid of Armstrong a couple of hours before that."

"How?"

Lombard shrugged his shoulders.

"That we don't know. But if you ask me, we've only one danger to fear—and that danger is Blore! What do we know about the man? Less than nothing! All this ex-policeman story may be bunkum! He may be anybody—a mad millionaire—a crazy business man—an escaped inmate of Broadmoor. One thing's certain. He *could* have done every one of these crimes."

Vera had gone rather white. She said in a slightly breathless voice:

"And supposing he gets—us?"

Lombard said softly, patting the revolver in his pocket:

"I'm going to take very good care he doesn't."

Then he looked at her curiously.

"Touching faith in me, haven't you, Vera? Quite sure I wouldn't shoot you?"

Vera said:

"One has got to trust some one. . . . As a matter of fact I think you're wrong about Blore. I still think it's Armstrong."

She turned to him suddenly.

"Don't you feel—all the time—that there's *some one*. Some one watching and waiting?"

Lombard said slowly:

"That's just nerves."

Vera said eagerly:

"Then you *have* felt it?"

She shivered. She bent a little closer.

"Tell me—you don't think—" She broke off, went on: "I read a story once—about two judges that came to a small American town—from the Supreme Court. They administered justice—Absolute Justice. *Because—they didn't come from this world at all.* . . ."

Lombard raised his eyebrows.

He said:

"Heavenly visitants, eh? No, I don't believe in the supernatural. This business is human enough."

Vera said in a low voice:

"Sometimes—I'm not sure. . . ."

Lombard looked at her. He said:

"That's conscience. . . ." After a moment's silence he said very quietly: "So you *did* drown that kid after all?"

Vera said vehemently:

"I didn't! I didn't! You've no right to say that!"

He laughed easily.

"Oh, yes, you did, my good girl! I don't know why. Can't imagine. There was a man in it probably. Was that it?"

A sudden feeling of lassitude, of intense weariness, spread over Vera's limbs. She said in a dull voice:

"Yes—there was a man in it. . . ."

Lombard said softly:

"Thanks. That's what I wanted to know. . . ."

Vera sat up suddenly. She exclaimed:

"What was that? It wasn't an earthquake?"

Lombard said:

"No, no. Queer, though—a thud shook the ground. And I thought—did you hear a sort of cry? I did."

They stared up at the house.

Lombard said:

"It came from there. We'd better go up and see."

"No, no, I'm not going."

"Please yourself. I am."

Vera said desperately:

"All right. I'll come with you."

They walked up the slope to the house. The terrace was peaceful and innocuous-looking in the sunshine. They hesitated there a minute, then in-

stead of entering by the front door, they made a cautious circuit of the house.

They found Blore. He was spread-eagled on the stone terrace on the east side, his head crushed and mangled by a great block of white marble.

Philip looked up. He said:

"Whose is that window just above?"

Vera said in a low shuddering voice:

"It's mine—and *that's the clock from my mantelpiece*. . . . I remember now. It was—shaped like a bear."

She repeated and her voice shook and quavered:

"It was shaped like a bear. . . ."

3

Philip grasped her shoulder.

He said, and his voice was urgent and grim:

"This settles it. Armstrong is in hiding somewhere in that house. I'm going to get him."

But Vera clung to him. She cried:

"Don't be a fool. It's *us* now! We're next! He *wants* us to look for him! He's *counting* on it!"

Philip stopped. He said thoughtfully:

"There's something in that."

Vera cried:

"At any rate, you do admit now I was right."

He nodded.

"Yes—you win! It's Armstrong all right. But where the devil did he hide himself? We went over the place with a fine-tooth comb."

Vera said urgently:

"If you didn't find him last night, you *won't find him now*. . . . That's common-sense."

Lombard said reluctantly:

"Yes, but—"

"He must have prepared a secret place beforehand—naturally—of course it's just what he would do. You know, like a Priest's Hole in old manor houses."

"This isn't an old house of that kind."

"He could have had one made."

Philip Lombard shook his head.

He said:

"We measured the place—that first morning. I'll swear there's no space unaccounted for."

Vera said:

"There must be. . . ."

Lombard said:

"I'd like to see—"

Vera cried:

"Yes, you'd like to see! And he knows that! He's in there—waiting for you."

Lombard said, half bringing out the revolver from his pocket:

"I've got this, you know."

"You said Blore was all right—that he was more than a match for Armstrong. So he was physically, and he was on the lookout too. But what you don't seem to realize is that Armstrong is *mad*! And a madman has all the advantages on his side. He's twice as cunning as any one sane can be."

Lombard put back the revolver in his pocket. He said:

"Come on, then."

4

Lombard said at last:

"What are we going to do when night comes?"

Vera didn't answer. He went on accusingly:

"You haven't thought of that?"

She said helplessly:

"What *can* we do? Oh, my God, I'm *frightened*. . . ."

Philip Lombard said thoughtfully:

"It's fine weather. There will be a moon. We must find a place—up by the top cliffs perhaps. We can sit there and wait for morning. *We mustn't go to sleep*. . . . We must watch the whole time. And if any one comes up towards us, I shall shoot!"

He paused:

"You'll be cold, perhaps, in that thin dress?"

Vera said with a raucous laugh:

"Cold? I should be colder if I were dead!"

Philip Lombard said quietly:

"Yes, that's true. . . ."

Vera moved restlessly.

She said:

"I shall go mad if I sit here any longer. Let's move about."

"All right."

They paced slowly up and down, along the line of the rocks overlooking the sea. The sun was dropping towards the west. The light was golden and mellow. It enveloped them in a golden glow.

Vera said, with a sudden nervous little giggle:

"Pity we can't have a bathe. . . ."

Philip was looking down towards the sea. He said abruptly:

"What's that, there? You see—by that big rock? No—a little further to the right."

Vera stared. She said:

"It looks like somebody's clothes!"

"A bather, eh?" Lombard laughed. "Queer. I suppose it's only seaweed."

Vera said:

"Let's go and look."

"It is clothes," said Lombard as they drew nearer. "A bundle of them. That's a boot. Come on, let's scramble along here."

They scrambled over the rocks.

Vera stopped suddenly. She said:

"*It's not clothes—it's a man. . . .*"

The man was wedged between two rocks, flung there by the tide earlier in the day.

Lombard and Vera reached it in a last scramble. They bent down.

A purple discoloured face—a hideous drowned face. . . .

Lombard said:

"My God! it's *Armstrong*. . . ."

CHAPTER XVI

AEONS PASSED . . . worlds span and whirled. . . . Time was motionless. . . . It stood still—it passed through a thousand ages. . . .

No, it was only a minute or so. . . .

Two people were standing looking down on a dead man. . . .

Slowly, very slowly, Vera Claythorne and Philip Lombard lifted their heads and looked into each other's eyes. . . .

2

Lombard laughed.

He said:

"So that's it, is it, Vera?"

Vera said:

"There's no one on the island—no one at all—*except us two*. . . ."

Her voice was a whisper—nothing more.

Lombard said:

"Precisely. So we know where we are, don't we?"

Vera said:

"How was it worked—that trick with the marble bear?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"A conjuring trick, my dear—a very good one. . . ."

Their eyes met again.

Vera thought:

"Why did I never see his face properly before. A wolf—that's what it is—a wolf's face. . . . Those horrible teeth. . . ."

Lombard said, and his voice was a snarl—dangerous—menacing:

"This is the end, you understand. We've come to the truth now. And it's the end. . . ."

Vera said quietly:

"I understand. . . ."

She stared out to sea. General Macarthur had stared out to sea—when—only yesterday? Or was it the day before? He too had said, *"This is the end. . . ."*

He had said it with acceptance—almost with welcome.

But to Vera the words—the thought—brought rebellion.

No, it should not be the end.

She looked down at the dead man. She said:

"Poor Dr. Armstrong. . . ."

Lombard sneered.

He said:

"What's this? Womanly pity?"

Vera said:

"Why not? Haven't you any pity?"

He said:

"I've no pity for you. Don't expect it!"

Vera looked down again at the body. She said:

"We must move him. Carry him up to the house."

"To join the other victims, I suppose? All neat and tidy. As far as I'm concerned he can stay where he is."

Vera said:

"At any rate, let's get him out of reach of the sea."

Lombard laughed. He said:

"If you like."

He bent—tugging at the body. Vera leaned against him, helping him. She pulled and tugged with all her might.

Lombard panted:

"Not such an easy job."

They managed it, however, drawing the body clear of high water mark.

Lombard said as he straightened up:

"Satisfied?"

Vera said:

"Quite."

Her tone warned him. He spun round. Even as he clapped his hand to his pocket he knew that he would find it empty.

She had moved a yard or two away and was facing him, revolver in hand.

Lombard said:

"So that's the reason for your womanly solicitude! You wanted to pick my pocket."

She nodded.

She held it steadily and unwaveringly.

Death was very near to Philip Lombard now. It had never, he knew, been nearer.

Nevertheless he was not beaten yet.

He said authoritatively:

"Give that revolver to me."

Vera laughed.

Lombard said:

"Come on, hand it over."

His quick brain was working. Which way—which method—talk her over—lull her into security—or a swift dash—

All his life Lombard had taken the risky way. He took it now.

He spoke slowly, argumentatively.

"Now look here, my dear girl, you just listen—"

And then he sprang. Quick as a panther—as any other feline creature. . . .

Automatically Vera pressed the trigger. . . .

Lombard's leaping body stayed poised in mid-spring, then crashed heavily to the ground.

Vera came warily forward, the revolver ready in her hand.

But there was no need of caution.

Philip Lombard was dead—shot through the heart. . . .

3

Relief possessed Vera—enormous exquisite relief.

At last it was over.

There was no more fear—no more steeling of her nerves. . . .

She was alone on the island. . . .

Alone with nine dead bodies. . . .

But what did that matter? *She* was alive. . . .

She sat there—exquisitely happy—exquisitely at peace. . . .

No more fear. . . .

4

The sun was setting when Vera moved at last. Sheer reaction had kept

her immobile. There had been no room in her for anything but the glorious sense of safety.

She realized now that she was hungry and sleepy. Principally sleepy. She wanted to throw herself on her bed and sleep and sleep and sleep. . . .

To-morrow, perhaps, they would come and rescue her—but she didn't really mind. She didn't mind staying here. Not now that she was alone. . . .

Oh! blessed, blessed peace. . . .

She got to her feet and glanced up at the house.

Nothing to be afraid of any longer! No terrors waiting for her! Just an ordinary well-built modern house. And yet, a little earlier in the day, she had not been able to look at it without shivering. . . .

Fear—what a strange thing fear was. . . .

Well, it was over now. She had conquered—had triumphed over the most deadly peril. By her own quick-wittedness and adroitness she had turned the tables on her would-be destroyer.

She began to walk up towards the house.

The sun was setting, the sky to the west was streaked with red and orange. It was beautiful and peaceful. . . .

Vera thought:

"The whole thing might be a dream. . . ."

How tired she was—terribly tired. Her limbs ached, her eyelids were drooping. Not to be afraid any more. . . . To sleep. Sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep. . . .

To sleep safely since she was alone on the island. One little Indian boy left all alone.

She smiled to herself.

She went in at the front door. The house, too, felt strangely peaceful.

Vera thought:

"Ordinarily one wouldn't care to sleep where there's a dead body in practically every bedroom!"

Should she go to the kitchen and get herself something to eat?

She hesitated a moment, then decided against it. She was really too tired. . . .

She paused by the dining-room door. There were still three little china figures in the middle of the table.

Vera laughed.

She said:

"You're behind the times, my dears."

She picked up two of them and tossed them out through the window. She heard them crash on the stone of the terrace.

The third little figure she picked up and held in her hand.

She said:

"You can come with me. We've won, my dear! We've won!"

The hall was dim in the dying light.

Vera, the little Indian clasped in her hand, began to mount the stairs. Slowly, because her legs were suddenly very tired.

"One little Indian boy left all alone." How did it end? Oh, yes! *"He got married and then there were none."*

Married. . . . Funny, how she suddenly got the feeling again that Hugo was in the house. . . .

Very strong. Yes, Hugo was upstairs waiting for her.

Vera said to herself:

"Don't be a fool. You're so tired that you're imagining the most fantastic things. . . ."

Slowly up the stairs. . . .

At the top of them something fell from her hand, making hardly any noise on the soft pile carpet. She did not notice that she had dropped the revolver. She was only conscious of clasping a little china figure.

How very quiet the house was. And yet—it didn't seem like an empty house. . . .

Hugo, upstairs, waiting for her. . . .

"One little Indian boy left all alone." What was the last line again? Something about being married—or was it something else?

She had come now to the door of her room. Hugo was waiting for her inside—she was quite sure of it.

She opened the door. . . .

She gave a gasp. . . .

What was that—hanging from the hook in the ceiling? A rope with a noose all ready? And a chair to stand upon—a chair that could be kicked away. . . .

That was what Hugo wanted. . . .

And of course that was the last line of the rhyme.

"He went and hanged himself and then there were none. . . ."

The little china figure fell from her hand. It rolled unheeded and broke against the fender.

Like an automaton Vera moved forward. This was the end—here where the cold wet hand (Cyril's hand, of course) had touched her throat. . . .

"You can go to the rock, Cyril. . . ."

That was what murder was—as easy as that!

But afterwards you went on remembering. . . .

She climbed up on the chair, her eyes staring in front of her like a sleep-walker's. . . . She adjusted the noose round her neck.

Hugo was there to see she did what she had to do.

She kicked away the chair. . . .

EPILOGUE

SIR THOMAS LEGGE, Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard, said irritably:

"But the whole thing's incredible!"

Inspector Maine said respectfully:

"I know, sir."

The A.C. went on:

"Ten people dead on an island and not a living soul on it. It doesn't make sense!"

Inspector Maine said stolidly:

"Nevertheless, it *happened*, sir."

Sir Thomas Legge said:

"Damn it all, Maine, somebody must have killed 'em."

"That's just our problem, sir."

"Nothing helpful in the doctor's report?"

"No, sir. Wargrave and Lombard were shot, the first through the head, the second through the heart. Miss Brent and Marston died of Cyanide poisoning. Mrs. Rogers died of an overdose of Chloral. Rogers' head was split open. Blore's head was crushed in. Armstrong died of drowning. Macarthur's skull was fractured by a blow on the back of the head and Vera Claythorne was hanged."

The A.C. winced. He said:

"Nasty business—all of it."

He considered for a minute or two. He said irritably:

"Do you mean to say that you haven't been able to get anything helpful out of the Sticklehaven people. Dash it, they must know something."

Inspector Maine shrugged his shoulders.

"They're ordinary decent seafaring folk. They know that the island was bought by a man called Owen—and that's about all they do know."

"Who provisioned the island and made all the necessary arrangements?"

"Man called Morris. Isaac Morris."

"And what does he say about it all?"

"He can't say anything, sir, he's dead."

The A.C. frowned.

"Do we know anything about this Morris?"

"Oh, yes, sir, we know about him. He wasn't a very savoury gentleman, Mr. Morris. He was implicated in that share-pushing fraud of Bennito's three years ago—we're sure of that though we can't prove it. And he was mixed up in the dope business. And again we can't prove it. He was a very careful man, Morris."

"And he was behind this island business?"

"Yes, sir, he put through the sale—though he made it clear that he was buying Indian Island for a third party, unnamed."

"Surely there's something to be found out on the financial angle, there?" Inspector Maine smiled.

"Not if you knew Morris! He can wangle figures until the best chartered accountant in the country wouldn't know if he was on his head or his heels! We've had a taste of that in the Bennito business. No, he covered his employer's tracks all right."

The other man sighed. Inspector Maine went on:

"It was Morris who made all the arrangements down at Sticklehaven. Represented himself as acting for 'Mr. Owen.' And it was he who explained to the people down there that there was some experiment on—some bet about living on a 'desert island' for a week—and that no notice was to be taken of any appeal for help from out there."

Sir Thomas Legge stirred uneasily. He said:

"And you're telling me that those people didn't smell a rat? Not even then?"

Maine shrugged his shoulders. He said:

"You're forgetting, sir, that Indian Island previously belonged to young Elmer Robson, the American. He had the most extraordinary parties down there. I've no doubt the local people's eyes fairly popped out over them. But they got used to it and they'd begun to feel that anything to do with Indian Island would necessarily be incredible. It's natural, that, sir, when you come to think of it."

The Assistant Commissioner admitted gloomily that he supposed it was. Maine said:

"Fred Narracott—that's the man who took the party out there—did say one thing that was illuminating. He said he was surprised to see what sort of people these were. 'Not at all like Mr. Robson's parties.' I think it was the fact that they were all so normal and so quiet that made him override Morris' orders and take out a boat to the island after he'd heard about the S O S signals."

"When did he and the other men go?"

"The signals were seen by a party of boy scouts on the morning of the 11th. There was no possibility of getting out there that day. The men got there on the afternoon of the 12th at the first moment possible to run a boat ashore there. They're all quite positive that nobody could have left the island before they got there. There was a big sea on after the storm."

"Couldn't some one have swum ashore?"

"It's over a mile to the coast and there were heavy seas and big breakers inshore. And there were a lot of people, boy scouts and others on the cliffs looking out towards the island and watching."

The A.C. sighed. He said:

"What about that gramophone record you found in the house? Couldn't you get hold of anything there that might help?"

Inspector Maine said:

"I've been into that. It was supplied by a firm that do a lot of theatrical stuff and film effects. It was sent to U. N. Owen, Esq., c/o Isaac Morris, and was understood to be required for the amateur performance of a hitherto unacted play. The typescript of it was returned with the record."

Legge said:

"And what about the subject matter, eh?"

Inspector Maine said gravely:

"I'm coming to that, sir."

He cleared his throat.

"I've investigated those accusations as thoroughly as I can.

"Starting with the Rogerses who were the first to arrive on the island. They were in service with a Miss Brady who died suddenly. Can't get anything definite out of the doctor who attended her. He says they certainly didn't poison her, or anything like that, but his personal belief is that there was some funny business—that she died as the result of neglect on their part. Says it's the sort of thing that's quite impossible to prove.

"Then there is Mr. Justice Wargrave. That's O.K. He was the judge who sentenced Seton.

"By the way, Seton was guilty—unmistakably guilty. Evidence turned up later after he was hanged which proved that beyond any shadow of doubt. But there was a good deal of comment at the time—nine people out of ten thought Seton was innocent and that the judge's summing up had been vindictive.

"The Claythorne girl, I find, was governess in a family where a death occurred by drowning. However, she doesn't seem to have had anything to do with it, and as a matter of fact she behaved very well, swam out to the rescue and was actually carried out to sea and only just rescued in time."

"Go on," said the A.C. with a sigh.

Maine took a deep breath.

"Dr. Armstrong now. Well-known man. Had a consulting room in Harley Street. Absolutely straight and aboveboard in his profession. Haven't been able to trace any record of an illegal operation or anything of that kind. It's true that there was a woman called Clees who was operated on by him way back in 1925 at Leithmore, when he was attached to the hospital there. Peritonitis and she died on the operating table. Maybe he wasn't very skilful over the op.—after all he hadn't much experience—but after all clumsiness isn't a criminal offence. There was certainly no motive.

"Then there's Miss Emily Brent. Girl, Beatrice Taylor, was in service with

her. Got pregnant, was turned out by her mistress and went and drowned herself. Not a nice business—but again not criminal.”

“That,” said the A.C., “seems to be the point. U. N. Owen dealt with cases that the law couldn’t touch.”

Maine went stolidly on with his list.

“Young Marston was a fairly reckless car driver—had his licence endorsed twice and he ought to have been prohibited from driving, in my opinion. That’s all there is to him. The two names John and Lucy Combes were those of two kids he knocked down and killed near Cambridge. Some friends of his gave evidence for him and he was let off with a fine.

“Can’t find anything definite about General Macarthur. Fine record—war service—all the rest of it. Arthur Richmond was serving under him in France and was killed in action. No friction of any kind between him and the General. They were close friends as a matter of fact. There were some blunders made about that time—commanding officers sacrificed men unnecessarily—possibly this was a blunder of that kind.”

“Possibly,” said the A.C.

“Now, Philip Lombard. Lombard has been mixed up in some very curious shows abroad. He’s sailed very near the law once or twice. Got a reputation for daring and for not being over-scrupulous. Sort of fellow who might do several murders in some quiet out-of-the-way spot.

“Then we come to Blore.” Maine hesitated. “He of course was one of our lot.”

The other man stirred.

“Blore,” said the Assistant Commissioner forcibly, “was a bad hat!”

“You think so, sir?”

The A.C. said:

“I always thought so. But he was clever enough to get away with it. It’s my opinion that he committed black perjury in the Landor case. I wasn’t happy about it at the time. But I couldn’t find anything. I put Harris onto it and *he* couldn’t find anything but I’m still of the opinion that there was something to find if we’d known how to set about it. The man wasn’t straight.”

There was a pause, then Sir Thomas Legge said:

“And Isaac Morris is dead, you say? When did he die?”

“I thought you’d soon come to that, sir. Isaac Morris died on the night of August 8th. Took an overdose of sleeping stuff—one of the barbiturates, I understand. There wasn’t anything to show whether it was accident or suicide.”

Legge said slowly:

“Care to know what I think, Maine?”

“Perhaps I can guess, sir.”

Legge said heavily:

"That death of Morris' is a damned sight too opportune!"

Inspector Maine nodded. He said:

"I thought you'd say that, sir."

The Assistant Commissioner brought down his fist with a bang on the table. He cried out:

"The whole thing's fantastic—impossible. Ten people killed on a bare rock of an island—and we don't know who did it, or why, or how."

Maine coughed. He said:

"Well, it's not quite like that, sir. We do know *why*, more or less. Some fanatic with a bee in his bonnet about justice. He was out to get people who were beyond the reach of the law. He picked ten people—whether they were really guilty or not doesn't matter—"

The Commissioner stirred. He said sharply:

"Doesn't it? It seems to me—"

He stopped. Inspector Maine waited respectfully. With a sigh Legge shook his head.

"Carry on," he said. "Just for a minute I felt I'd got somewhere. Got, as it were, the clue to the thing. It's gone now. Go ahead with what you were saying."

Maine went on:

"There were ten people to be—executed, let's say. They *were* executed. U. N. Owen accomplished his task. And somehow or other he spirited himself off that island into thin air."

The A.C. said:

"First-class vanishing trick. But you know, Maine, there must be an explanation."

Maine said:

"You're thinking, sir, that if the man wasn't on the island, he couldn't have left the island, and according to the account of the interested parties he never was on the island. Well, then the only explanation possible is that he was actually one of the ten."

The A.C. nodded.

Maine said earnestly:

"We thought of that, sir. We went into it. Now, to begin with, we're not quite in the dark as to what happened on Indian Island. Vera Claythorne kept a diary, so did Emily Brent. Old Wargrave made some notes—dry legal cryptic stuff, but quite clear. And Blore made notes too. All those accounts tally. The deaths occurred in this order: Marston, Mrs. Rogers, Macarthur, Rogers, Miss Brent, Wargrave. After his death Vera Claythorne's diary states that Armstrong left the house in the night and that Blore and Lombard had

gone after him. Blore has one more entry in his notebook. Just two words: 'Armstrong disappeared.'

"Now, sir, it seemed to me, taking everything into account, that we might find here a perfectly good solution. Armstrong was drowned, you remember. Granting that Armstrong was mad, what was to prevent him having killed off all the others and then committed suicide by throwing himself over the cliff, or perhaps while trying to swim to the mainland?

"That was a good solution—but it won't do. No, sir, it won't do. First of all there's the police surgeon's evidence. He got to the island early on the morning of August 13th. He couldn't say much to help us. All he could say was that all the people had been dead at least thirty-six hours and probably a good deal longer. But he was fairly definite about Armstrong. Said he must have been from eight to ten hours in the water before his body was washed up. That works out at this, that Armstrong must have gone into the sea sometime during the night of the 10th-11th—and I'll explain why. We found the point where the body was washed up—it had been wedged between two rocks and there were bits of cloth, hair, etc., on them. It must have been deposited there at high water on the 11th—that's to say round about 11 o'clock A.M. After that, the storm subsided, and succeeding high water marks are considerably lower.

"You might say, I suppose, that Armstrong managed to polish off the other three *before* he went into the sea that night. But there's another point and one you can't get over. *Armstrong's body had been dragged above high water mark.* We found it well above the reach of any tide. And it was laid out straight on the ground—all neat and tidy.

"So that settles one point definitely. *Some one* was alive on the island *after Armstrong was dead.*"

He paused and then went on.

"And that leaves—just what exactly? Here's the position early on the morning of the 11th. Armstrong has 'disappeared' (*drowned*). That leaves us three people. Lombard, Blore and Vera Claythorne. Lombard was shot. His body was down by the sea—near Armstrong's. Vera Claythorne was found hanged in her own bedroom. Blore's body was on the terrace. His head was crushed in by a heavy marble clock that it seems reasonable to suppose fell on him from the window above."

The A.C. said sharply:

"Whose window?"

"Vera Claythorne's. Now, sir, let's take each of these cases separately. First Philip Lombard. Let's say *he* pushed over that lump of marble onto Blore—then he doped Vera Claythorne and strung her up. Lastly, he went down to the seashore and shot himself.

"But if so, *who took away the revolver from him?* For that revolver was

found up in the house just inside the door at the top of the stairs—Wargrave's room."

The A.C. said:

"Any fingerprints on it?"

"Yes, sir, Vera Claythorne's."

"But, man alive, then—"

"I know what you're going to say, sir. That it was Vera Claythorne. That she shot Lombard, took the revolver back to the house, toppled the marble block onto Blore and then—hanged herself.

"And that's quite all right—up to a point. There's a chair in her bedroom and on the seat of it there are marks of seaweed same as on her shoes. Looks as though she stood on the chair, adjusted the rope round her neck and kicked away the chair.

"But that chair wasn't found kicked over. It was, like all the other chairs, neatly put back against the wall. That was done *after Vera Claythorne's death*—by *some one else*.

"That leaves us with Blore and if you tell me that after shooting Lombard and inducing Vera Claythorne to hang herself he then went out and pulled down a whacking great block of marble on himself by tying a string to it or something like that—well, I simply don't believe you. Men don't commit suicide that way—and what's more Blore wasn't that kind of man. *We* knew Blore—and he was not the man that you'd ever accuse of a desire for abstract justice."

The Assistant Commissioner said:

"I agree."

Inspector Maine said:

"And therefore, sir, there must have been *some one else* on the island. Some one who tidied up when the whole business was over. But where was he all the time—and where did he go to? The Sticklehaven people are absolutely certain that no one could have left the island before the rescue boat got there. But in that case—"

He stopped.

The Assistant Commissioner said:

"In that case—"

He sighed. He shook his head. He leant forward.

"But in that case," he said, "*who killed them?*"

A MANUSCRIPT DOCUMENT SENT TO SCOTLAND YARD
BY THE MASTER OF THE EMMA JANE, FISHING TRAWLER

FROM MY earliest youth I realized that my nature was a mass of contradictions. I have, to begin with, an incurably romantic imagination. The practice of throwing a bottle into the sea with an important document inside was one that never failed to thrill me when reading adventure stories as a child. It thrills me still—and for that reason I have adopted this course—writing my confession, enclosing it in a bottle, sealing the latter, and casting it into the waves. There is, I suppose, a hundred to one chance that my confession may be found—and then (or do I flatter myself?) a hitherto unsolved murder mystery will be explained.

I was born with other traits besides my romantic fancy. I have a definite sadistic delight in seeing or causing death. I remember experiments with wasps—with various garden pests. . . . From an early age I knew very strongly the lust to kill.

But side by side with this went a contradictory trait—a strong sense of justice. It is abhorrent to me that an innocent person or creature should suffer or die by any act of mine. I have always felt strongly that right should prevail.

It may be understood—I think a psychologist would understand—that with my mental makeup being what it was, I adopted the law as a profession. The legal profession satisfied nearly all my instincts.

Crime and its punishment has always fascinated me. I enjoy reading every kind of detective story and thriller. I have devised for my own private amusement the most ingenious ways of carrying out a murder.

When in due course I came to preside over a court of law, that other secret instinct of mine was encouraged to develop. To see a wretched criminal squirming in the dock, suffering the tortures of the damned, as his doom came slowly and slowly nearer, was to me an exquisite pleasure. Mind you, I took no pleasure in seeing an *innocent* man there. On at least two occasions I stopped cases where to my mind the accused was palpably innocent, directing the jury that there was no case. Thanks, however, to the fairness and efficiency of our police force, the majority of the accused persons who have come before me to be tried for murder, have been guilty.

I will say here that such was the case with the man Edward Seton. His appearance and manner were misleading and he created a good impression on the jury. But not only the evidence, which was clear, though unspectacular, but my own knowledge of criminals told me without any doubt that the man had actually committed the crime with which he was charged, the brutal murder of an elderly woman who trusted him.

I have a reputation as a hanging judge, but that is unfair. I have always been strictly just and scrupulous in my summing up of a case.

All I have done is to protect the jury against the emotional effect of emotional appeals by some of our more emotional counsel. I have drawn their attention to the actual evidence.

For some years past I have been aware of a change within myself, a lessening of control—a desire to act instead of to judge.

I have wanted—let me admit it frankly—to *commit a murder myself*. I recognized this as the desire of the artist to express himself! I was, or could be, an artist in crime! My imagination, sternly checked by the exigencies of my profession, waxed secretly to colossal force.

I must—I must—I *must*—commit a murder! And what is more, it must be no ordinary murder! It must be a fantastical crime—something stupendous—out of the common! In that one respect, I have still, I think, an adolescent's imagination.

I wanted something theatrical, impossible!

I wanted to kill. . . . Yes, I wanted to kill. . . .

But—incongruous as it may seem to some—I was restrained and hampered by my innate sense of justice. The innocent must not suffer.

And then, quite suddenly, the idea came to me—started by a chance remark uttered during casual conversation. It was a doctor to whom I was talking—some ordinary undistinguished G.P. He mentioned casually how often murder must be committed which the law was unable to touch.

And he instanced a particular case—that of an old lady, a patient of his who had recently died. He was, he said, himself convinced that her death was due to the withholding of a restorative drug by a married couple who attended on her and who stood to benefit very substantially by her death. That sort of thing, he explained, was quite impossible to prove, but he was nevertheless quite sure of it in his own mind. He added that there were many cases of a similar nature going on all the time—cases of deliberate murder—and all quite untouchable by the law.

That was the beginning of the whole thing. I suddenly saw my way clear. And I determined to commit not one murder, but murder on a grand scale.

A childish rhyme of my infancy came back into my mind—the rhyme of the ten little Indian boys. It had fascinated me as a child of two—the inexorable diminishment—the sense of inevitability.

I began, secretly, to collect victims. . . .

I will not take up space here by going into details of how this was accomplished. I had a certain routine line of conversation which I employed with nearly every one I met—and the results I got were really surprising. During the time I was in a nursing home I collected the case of Dr. Armstrong—a violently teetotal sister who attended on me being anxious to prove

to me the evils of drink by recounting to me a case many years ago in hospital when a doctor under the influence of alcohol had killed a patient on whom he was operating. A careless question as to where the sister in question had trained, etc., soon gave me the necessary data. I tracked down the doctor and the patient mentioned without difficulty.

A conversation between two old military gossips in my Club put me on the track of General Macarthur. A man who had recently returned from the Amazon gave me a devastating résumé of the activities of one Philip Lombard. An indignant *mem sahib* in Majorca recounted the tale of the Puritan Emily Brent and her wretched servant girl. Anthony Marston I selected from a large group of people who had committed similar offences. His complete callousness and his inability to feel any responsibility for the lives he had taken made him, I considered, a type dangerous to the community and unfit to live. Ex-Inspector Blore came my way quite naturally, some of my professional brethren discussing the Landor case with freedom and vigour. I took a serious view of his offence. The police, as servants of the law, must be of a high order of integrity. For their word is perforce believed by virtue of their profession.

Finally there was the case of Vera Claythorne. It was when I was crossing the Atlantic. At a late hour one night the sole occupants of the smoking-room were myself and a good-looking young man called Hugo Hamilton.

Hugo Hamilton was unhappy. To assuage that unhappiness he had taken a considerable quantity of drink. He was in the maudlin confidential stage. Without much hope of any result I automatically started my routine conversational gambit. The response was startling. I can remember his words now. He said:

"You're right. Murder isn't what most people think—giving some one a dollop of arsenic—pushing them over a cliff—that sort of stuff." He leaned forward, thrusting his face into mine. He said: "I've known a murderess—known her, I tell you. And what's more I was crazy about her. . . . God help me, sometimes I think I still am. . . . It's Hell, I tell you—Hell— You see, she did it more or less for me. . . . Not that I ever dreamed. Women are fiends—absolute fiends—you wouldn't think a girl like that—a nice straight jolly girl—you wouldn't think she'd do that, would you? That she'd take a kid out to sea and let it drown—you wouldn't think a *woman* could do a thing like that?"

I said to him:

"Are you sure she did do it?"

He said and in saying it he seemed suddenly to sober up:

"I'm quite sure. Nobody else ever thought of it. But I knew the moment I looked at her—when I got back—after . . . And she knew I knew. . . . What she didn't realize was that I loved that kid. . . ."

He didn't say any more, but it was easy enough for me to trace back the story and reconstruct it.

I needed a tenth victim. I found him in a man named Morris. He was a shady little creature. Amongst other things he was a dope pedlar and he was responsible for inducing the daughter of friends of mine to take to drugs. She committed suicide at the age of twenty-one.

During all this time of search my plan had been gradually maturing in my mind. It was now complete and the coping stone to it was an interview I had with a doctor in Harley Street. I have mentioned that I underwent an operation. My interview in Harley Street told me that another operation would be useless. My medical adviser wrapped up the information very prettily, but I am accustomed to getting at the truth of a statement.

I did not tell the doctor of my decision—that my death should not be a slow and protracted one as it would be in the course of nature. No, my death should take place in a blaze of excitement. I would *live* before I died.

And now to the actual mechanics of the crime of Indian Island. To acquire the island, using the man Morris to cover my tracks, was easy enough. He was an expert in that sort of thing. Tabulating the information I had collected about my prospective victims, I was able to concoct a suitable bait for each. None of my plans miscarried. All my guests arrived at Indian Island on the 8th of August. The party included myself.

Morris was already accounted for. He suffered from indigestion. Before leaving London I gave him a capsule to take last thing at night which had, I said, done wonders for my own gastric juices. He accepted it unhesitatingly—the man was a slight hypochondriac. I had no fear that he would leave any compromising documents or memoranda behind. He was not that sort of man.

The order of death upon the island had been subjected by me to special thought and care. There were, I considered, amongst my guests, varying degrees of guilt. Those whose guilt was the lightest should, I decided, pass out first, and not suffer the prolonged mental strain and fear that the more cold-blooded offenders were to suffer.

Anthony Marston and Mrs. Rogers died first, the one instantaneously, the other in a peaceful sleep. Marston, I recognized, was a type born without that feeling of moral responsibility which most of us have. He was amoral—pagan. Mrs. Rogers, I had no doubt, had acted very largely under the influence of her husband.

I need not describe closely how those two met their deaths. The police will have been able to work that out quite easily. Potassium Cyanide is easily obtained by householders for putting down wasps. I had some in my possession and it was easy to slip it into Marston's almost empty glass during the tense period after the gramophone recital.

I may say that I watched the faces of my guests closely during that indictment and I had no doubt whatever, after my long court experience, that one and all were guilty.

During recent bouts of pain, I had been ordered a sleeping draught—Chloral Hydrate. It had been easy for me to suppress this until I had a lethal amount in my possession. When Rogers brought up some brandy for his wife, he set it down on a table and in passing that table I put the stuff into the brandy. It was easy, for at that time suspicion had not begun to set in.

General Macarthur met his death quite painlessly. He did not hear me come up behind him. I had, of course, to choose my time for leaving the terrace very carefully, but everything was successful.

As I had anticipated, a search was made of the island and it was discovered that there was no one on it but our seven selves. That at once created an atmosphere of suspicion. According to my plan I should shortly need an ally. I selected Dr. Armstrong for that part. He was a gullible sort of man, he knew me by sight and reputation and it was inconceivable to him that a man of my standing should actually be a murderer! All his suspicions were directed against Lombard and I pretended to concur in these. I hinted to him that I had a scheme by which it might be possible to trap the murderer into incriminating himself.

Though a search had been made of every one's room, no search had as yet been made of the persons themselves. But that was bound to come soon.

I killed Rogers on the morning of August 10th. He was chopping sticks for lighting the fire and did not hear me approach. I found the key to the dining-room door in his pocket. He had locked it the night before.

In the confusion attending the finding of Rogers' body I slipped into Lombard's room and abstracted his revolver. I knew that he would have one with him—in fact, I had instructed Morris to suggest as much when he interviewed him.

At breakfast I slipped my last dose of Chloral into Miss Brent's coffee when I was refilling her cup. We left her in the dining-room. I slipped in there a little while later—she was nearly unconscious and it was easy to inject a strong solution of Cyanide into her. The bumblebee business was really rather childish—but somehow, you know, it pleased me. I liked adhering as closely as possible to my nursery rhyme.

Immediately after this what I had already foreseen happened—indeed I believe I suggested it myself. We all submitted to a rigorous search. I had safely hidden away the revolver, and had no more Cyanide or Chloral in my possession.

It was then that I intimated to Armstrong that we must carry our plan into effect. It was simply this—I must appear to be the next victim. That would perhaps rattle the murderer—at any rate once I was supposed to be

dead I could move about the house and spy upon the unknown murderer.

Armstrong was keen on the idea. We carried it out that evening. A little plaster of red mud on the forehead—the red curtain and the wool and the stage was set. The lights of the candles were very flickering and uncertain and the only person who would examine me closely was Armstrong.

It worked perfectly. Miss Claythorne screamed the house down when she found the seaweed which I had thoughtfully arranged in her room. They all rushed up, and I took up my pose of a murdered man.

The effect on them when they found me was all that could be desired. Armstrong acted his part in the most professional manner. They carried me upstairs and laid me on my bed. Nobody worried about me, they were all too deadly scared and terrified of each other.

I had a rendezvous with Armstrong outside the house at a quarter to two. I took him up a little way behind the house on the edge of the cliff. I said that here we could see if any one else approached us, and we should not be seen from the house as the bedrooms faced the other way. He was still quite unsuspecting—and yet he ought to have been warned— If he had only remembered the words of the nursery rhyme, “A red herring swallowed one . . .” He took the red herring all right.

It was quite easy. I uttered an exclamation, leant over the cliff, told him to look, wasn’t that the mouth of a cave? He leant right over. A quick vigorous push sent him off his balance and splash into the heaving sea below. I returned to the house. It must have been my footfall that Blore heard. A few minutes after I had returned to Armstrong’s room I left it, this time making a certain amount of noise so that some one *should* hear me. I heard a door open as I got to the bottom of the stairs. They must have just glimpsed my figure as I went out of the front door.

It was a minute or two before they followed me. I had gone straight round the house and in at the dining-room window which I had left open. I shut the window and later I broke the glass. Then I went upstairs and laid myself out again on my bed.

I calculated that they would search the house again, but I did not think they would look closely at any of the corpses, a mere twitch aside of the sheet to satisfy themselves that it was not Armstrong masquerading as a body. This is exactly what occurred.

I forgot to say that I returned the revolver to Lombard’s room. It may be of interest to some one to know where it was hidden during the search. There was a big pile of tinned food in the larder. I opened the bottommost of the tins—biscuits I think it contained, bedded in the revolver and replaced the strip of adhesive tape.

I calculated, and rightly, that no one would think of working their way

through a pile of apparently untouched foodstuffs, especially as all the top tins were soldered.

The red curtain I had concealed by laying it flat on the seat of one of the drawing-room chairs under the chintz cover and the wool in the seat cushion, cutting a small hole.

And now came the moment that I had anticipated—three people who were so frightened of each other that anything might happen—and *one of them had a revolver*. I watched them from the windows of the house. When Blore came up alone I had the big marble clock poised ready. *Exit Blore*. . . .

From my window I saw Vera Claythorne shoot Lombard. A daring and resourceful young woman. I always thought she was a match for him and more. As soon as that had happened I set the stage in her bedroom.

It was an interesting psychological experiment. Would the consciousness of her own guilt, the state of nervous tension consequent on having just shot a man, be sufficient, together with the hypnotic suggestion of the surroundings, to cause her to take her own life? I thought it would. I was right. Vera Claythorne hanged herself before my eyes where I stood in the shadow of the wardrobe.

And now for the last stage. I came forward, picked up the chair and set it against the wall. I looked for the revolver and found it at the top of the stairs where the girl had dropped it. I was careful to preserve her fingerprints on it.

And now?

I shall finish writing this. I shall enclose it and seal it in a bottle and I shall throw the bottle into the sea.

Why?

Yes, why? . . .

It was my ambition to *invent* a murder mystery that no one could solve.

But no artist, I now realize, can be satisfied with art alone. There is a natural craving for recognition which cannot be gainsaid.

I have, let me confess it in all humility, a pitiful human wish that some one should know just how clever I have been. . . .

In all this, I have assumed that the mystery of Indian Island will remain unsolved. It may be, of course, that the police will be cleverer than I think. There are, after all, three clues. One: the police are perfectly aware that Edward Seton was guilty. They know, therefore, that one of the ten people on the island was not a murderer in any sense of the word, and it follows, paradoxically, that that person must logically be *the* murderer. The second clue lies in the seventh verse of the nursery rhyme. Armstrong's death is associated with a "red herring" which he swallowed—or rather which resulted in swallowing him! That is to say that at that stage of the affair some hocus-pocus is clearly indicated—and that Armstrong was deceived by it and sent

to his death. That might start a promising line of inquiry. For at that period there are only four persons and of those four I am clearly the only one likely to inspire him with confidence.

The third is symbolical. The manner of my death marking me on the forehead. The brand of Cain.

There is, I think, little more to say.

After entrusting my bottle and its message to the sea I shall go to my room and lay myself down on the bed. To my eyeglasses is attached what seems a length of fine black cord—but it is elastic cord. I shall lay the weight of the body on the glasses. The cord I shall loop round the door-handle and attach it, not too solidly, to the revolver. What I think will happen is this.

My hand, protected with a handkerchief, will press the trigger. My hand will fall to my side, the revolver, pulled by the elastic will recoil to the door, jarred by the door-handle it will detach itself from the elastic and fall. The elastic, released, will hang down innocently from the eyeglasses on which my body is lying. A handkerchief lying on the floor will cause no comment whatever.

I shall be found, laid neatly on my bed, shot through the forehead in accordance with the record kept by my fellow victims. Times of death cannot be stated with any accuracy by the time our bodies are examined.

When the sea goes down, there will come from the mainland boats and men.

And they will find ten dead bodies and an unsolved problem on Indian Island.

Signed

LAWRENCE WARGRAVE.

The Witness for the Prosecution

MR. MAYHERNE ADJUSTED his pince-nez and cleared his throat with a little dry-as-dust cough that was wholly typical of him. Then he looked again at the man opposite him, the man charged with willful murder.

Mr. Mayherne was a small man, precise in manner, neatly, not to say foppishly dressed, with a pair of very shrewd and piercing gray eyes. By no means a fool. Indeed, as a solicitor, Mr. Mayherne's reputation stood very high. His voice, when he spoke to his client, was dry but not unsympathetic.

"I must impress upon you again that you are in very grave danger, and that the utmost frankness is necessary."

Leonard Vole, who had been staring in a dazed fashion at the blank wall in front of him, transferred his glance to the solicitor.

"I know," he said hopelessly. "You keep telling me so. But I can't seem to realize yet that I'm charged with murder—*murder*. And such a dastardly crime, too."

Mr. Mayherne was practical, not emotional. He coughed again, took off his pince-nez, polished them carefully, and replaced them on his nose. Then he said, "Yes, yes, yes. Now, my dear Mr. Vole, we're going to make a determined effort to get you off—and we shall succeed—we shall succeed. But I must have all the facts. I must know just how damaging the case against you is likely to be. Then we can fix upon the best line of defense."

Still the young man looked at him in the same dazed, hopeless fashion. To Mr. Mayherne the case had seemed black enough, and the guilt of the prisoner assured. Now, for the first time, he felt a doubt.

"You think I'm guilty," said Leonard Vole, in a low voice. "But, by God, I swear I'm not! It looks pretty black against me, I know that. I'm like a man caught in a net—the meshes of it all round me, entangling me whichever way I turn. But I didn't do it, Mr. Mayherne, I didn't do it!"

In such a position a man was bound to protest his innocence. Mr. Mayherne knew that. Yet, in spite of himself, he was impressed. It might be, after all, that Leonard Vole was innocent.

"You are right, Mr. Vole," he said gravely. "The case does look very black against you. Nevertheless, I accept your assurance. Now, let us get to facts. I want you to tell me in your own words exactly how you came to make the acquaintance of Miss Emily French."

"It was one day in Oxford Street. I saw an elderly lady crossing the road. She was carrying a lot of parcels. In the middle of the street she dropped

them, tried to recover them, found a bus was almost on top of her, and just managed to reach the curb safely, dazed and bewildered by people having shouted at her. I recovered her parcels, wiped the mud off them as best I could, retied the string of one, and returned them to her."

"There was no question of your having saved her life?"

"Oh, dear me, no! All I did was to perform a common act of courtesy. She was extremely grateful, thanked me warmly, and said something about my manners not being those of most of the younger generation—I can't remember the exact words. Then I lifted my hat and went on. I never expected to see her again. But life is full of coincidences. That very evening I came across her at a party at a friend's house. She recognized me at once and asked that I should be introduced to her. I then found out that she was a Miss Emily French and that she lived at Cricklewood. I talked to her for some time. She was, I imagine, an old lady who took sudden and violent fancies to people. She took one to me on the strength of a perfectly simple action which anyone might have performed. On leaving, she shook me warmly by the hand and asked me to come and see her. I replied, of course, that I should be very pleased to do so, and she then urged me to name a day. I did not want particularly to go, but it would have seemed churlish to refuse, so I fixed on the following Saturday. After she had gone, I learned something about her from my friends. That she was rich, eccentric, lived alone with one maid, and owned no less than eight cats."

"I see," said Mr. Mayherne. "The question of her being well off came up as early as that?"

"If you mean that I inquired—" began Leonard Vole hotly, but Mr. Mayherne stilled him with a gesture.

"I have to look at the case as it will be presented by the other side. An ordinary observer would not have supposed Miss French to be a lady of means. She lived poorly, almost humbly. Unless you had been told the contrary, you would in all probability have considered her to be in poor circumstances—at any rate to begin with. Who was it exactly who told you that she was well off?"

"My friend, George Harvey, at whose house the party took place."

"Is he likely to remember having done so?"

"I really don't know. Of course it is some time ago now."

"Quite so, Mr. Vole. You see, the first aim of the prosecution will be to establish that you were in low water financially—that is true, is it not?"

Leonard Vole flushed.

"Yes," he said, in a low voice. "I'd been having a run of infernal bad luck just then."

"Quite so," said Mr. Mayherne again. "That being, as I say, in low water financially, you met this rich old lady and cultivated her acquaintance

assiduously. Now if we are in a position to say that you had no idea she was well off, and that you visited her out of pure kindness of heart—”

“Which is the case.”

“I dare say. I am not disputing the point. I am looking at it from the outside point of view. A great deal depends on the memory of Mr. Harvey. Is he likely to remember that conversation or is he not? Could he be confused by counsel into believing that it took place later?”

Leonard Vole reflected for some minutes. Then he said steadily enough, but with a rather pale face, “I do not think that that line would be successful, Mr. Mayherne. Several of those present heard his remark, and one or two of them chaffed me about my conquest of a rich old lady.”

The solicitor endeavored to hide his disappointment with a wave of the hand.

“Unfortunate,” he said. “But I congratulate you upon your plain speaking, Mr. Vole. It is to you I look to guide me. Your judgment is quite right. To persist in the line I spoke of would have been disastrous. We must leave that point. You made the acquaintance of Miss French, you called upon her, the acquaintanceship progressed. We want a clear reason for all this. Why did you, a young man of thirty-three, good-looking, fond of sport, popular with your friends, devote so much of your time to an elderly woman with whom you could hardly have anything in common?”

Leonard Vole flung out his hands in a nervous gesture.

“I can’t tell you—I really can’t tell you. After the first visit, she pressed me to come again, spoke of being lonely and unhappy. She made it difficult for me to refuse. She showed so plainly her fondness and affection for me that I was placed in an awkward position. You see, Mr. Mayherne, I’ve got a weak nature—I drift—I’m one of those people who can’t say no. And believe me or not, as you like, after the third or fourth visit I paid her I found myself getting genuinely fond of the old thing. My mother died when I was young, an aunt brought me up, and she, too, died before I was fifteen. If I told you that I genuinely enjoyed being mothered and pampered, I dare say you’d only laugh.”

Mr. Mayherne did not laugh. Instead he took off his pince-nez again and polished them, a sign with him that he was thinking deeply.

“I accept your explanation, Mr. Vole,” he said at last. “I believe it to be psychologically probable. Whether a jury would take that view of it is another matter. Please continue your narrative. When was it that Miss French first asked you to look into her business affairs?”

“After my third or fourth visit to her. She understood very little of money matters, and was worried about some investments.”

Mr. Mayherne looked up sharply.

“Be careful, Mr. Vole. The maid, Janet Mackenzie, declares that her mis-

tress was a good woman of business and transacted all her own affairs, and this is borne out by the testimony of her bankers."

"I can't help that," said Vole earnestly. "That's what she said to me."

Mr. Mayherne looked at him for a moment or two in silence. Though he had no intention of saying so, his belief in Leonard Vole's innocence was at that moment strengthened. He knew something of the mentality of elderly ladies. He saw Miss French, infatuated with the good-looking young man, hunting about for pretexts that would bring him to the house. What more likely than that she should plead ignorance of business, and beg him to help her with her money affairs? She was enough of a woman of the world to realize that any man is slightly flattered by such an admission of his superiority. Leonard Vole had been flattered. Perhaps, too, she had not been averse to letting this young man know that she was wealthy. Emily French had been a strong-willed old woman, willing to pay her price for what she wanted. All this passed rapidly through Mr. Mayherne's mind, but he gave no indication of it, and asked instead a further question.

"And did you handle her affairs for her at her request?"

"I did."

"Mr. Vole," said the solicitor, "I am going to ask you a very serious question, and one to which it is vital I should have a truthful answer. You were in low water financially. You had the handling of an old lady's affairs—an old lady who, according to her own statement, knew little or nothing of business. Did you at any time, or in any manner, convert to your own use the securities which you handled? Did you engage in any transaction for your own pecuniary advantage which will not bear the light of day?" He quelled the other's response. "Wait a minute before you answer. There are two courses open to us. Either we can make a feature of your probity and honesty in conducting her affairs while pointing out how unlikely it is that you would commit murder to obtain money which you might have obtained by such infinitely easier means. If, on the other hand, there is anything in your dealings which the prosecution will get hold of—if, to put it baldly, it can be proved that you swindled the old lady in any way, we must take the line that you had no motive for the murder, since she was already a profitable source of income to you. You perceive the distinction. Now, I beg of you, take your time before you reply."

But Leonard Vole took no time at all.

"My dealings with Miss French's affairs were all perfectly fair and above board. I acted for her interests to the very best of my ability, as anyone will find who looks into the matter."

"Thank you," said Mr. Mayherne. "You relieve my mind very much. I pay you the compliment of believing that you are far too clever to lie to me over such an important matter."

"Surely," said Vole eagerly, "the strongest point in my favor is the lack of motive. Granted that I cultivated the acquaintanceship of a rich old lady in the hopes of getting money out of her—that, I gather, is the substance of what you have been saying—surely her death frustrates all my hopes?"

The solicitor looked at him steadily. Then, very deliberately, he repeated his unconscious trick with his pince-nez. It was not until they were firmly replaced on his nose that he spoke.

"Are you not aware, Mr. Vole, that Miss French left a will under which you are the principal beneficiary?"

"What?" The prisoner sprang to his feet. His dismay was obvious and unforced. "My God! What are you saying? She left her money to me?"

Mr. Mayherne nodded slowly. Vole sank down again, his head in his hands.

"You pretend you know nothing of this will?"

"Pretend? There's no pretense about it. I knew nothing about it."

"What would you say if I told you that the maid, Janet Mackenzie, swears that you *did* know? That her mistress told her distinctly that she had consulted you in the matter, and told you of her intentions?"

"Say? That she's lying! No, I go too fast. Janet is an elderly woman. She was a faithful watchdog to her mistress, and she didn't like me. She was jealous and suspicious. I should say that Miss French confided her intentions to Janet, and that Janet either mistook something she said, or else was convinced in her own mind that I had persuaded the old lady into doing it. I dare say that she herself believes now that Miss French actually told her so."

"You don't think she dislikes you enough to lie deliberately about the matter?"

Leonard Vole looked shocked and startled.

"No, indeed! Why should she?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Mayherne thoughtfully. "But she's very bitter against you."

The wretched young man groaned again.

"I'm beginning to see," he muttered. "It's frightful. I made up to her, that's what they'll say, I got her to make a will leaving her money to me, and then I go there that night, and there's nobody in the house—they find her the next day—oh, my God, it's awful!"

"You are wrong about there being nobody in the house," said Mr. Mayherne. "Janet, as you remember, was to go out for the evening. She went, but about half past nine she returned to fetch the pattern of a blouse sleeve which she had promised to a friend. She let herself in by the back door, went upstairs and fetched it, and went out again. She heard voices in the sitting-room, though she could not distinguish what they said, but she will swear that one of them was Miss French's and one was a man's."

"At half past nine," said Leonard Vole. "At half past nine—" He sprang to his feet. "But then I'm saved—saved—"

"What do you mean, saved?" cried Mr. Mayherne, astonished.

"By half past nine I was at home again! My wife can prove that. I left Miss French about five minutes to nine. I arrived home about twenty past nine. My wife was there waiting for me. Oh, thank God—thank God! And bless Janet Mackenzie's sleeve pattern."

In his exuberance, he hardly noticed that the grave expression on the solicitor's face had not altered. But the latter's words brought him down to earth with a bump.

"Who, then, in your opinion, murdered Miss French?"

"Why, a burglar, of course, as was thought at first. The window was forced, you remember. She was killed with a heavy blow from a crowbar, and the crowbar was found lying on the floor beside the body. And several articles were missing. But for Janet's absurd suspicions and dislike of me, the police would never have swerved from the right track."

"That will hardly do, Mr. Vole," said the solicitor. "The things that were missing were mere trifles of no value, taken as a blind. And the marks on the window were not at all conclusive. Besides, think for yourself. You say you were no longer in the house by half past nine. Who, then, was the man Janet heard talking to Miss French in the sitting-room? She would hardly be having an amicable conversation with a burglar."

"No," said Vole. "No—" He looked puzzled and discouraged. "But, anyway," he added with reviving spirit, "it lets me out. I've got an alibi. You must see Romaine—my wife—at once."

"Certainly," acquiesced the lawyer. "I should already have seen Mrs. Vole but for her being absent when you were arrested. I wired to Scotland at once, and I understand that she arrives back tonight. I am going to call upon her immediately I leave here."

Vole nodded, a great expression of satisfaction settling down over his face.

"Yes, Romaine will tell you. My God! it's a lucky chance that."

"Excuse me, Mr. Vole, but you are very fond of your wife?"

"Of course."

"And she of you?"

"Romaine is devoted to me. She'd do anything in the world for me."

He spoke enthusiastically, but the solicitor's heart sank a little lower. The testimony of a devoted wife—would it gain credence?

"Was there anyone else who saw you return at nine-twenty. A maid, for instance?"

"We have no maid."

"Did you meet anyone in the street on the way back?"

"Nobody I knew. I rode part of the way in a bus. The conductor might remember."

Mr. Mayherne shook his head doubtfully.

"There is no one, then, who can confirm your wife's testimony?"

"No. But it isn't necessary, surely?"

"I dare say not. I dare say not," said Mr. Mayherne hastily. "Now there's just one thing more. Did Miss French know that you were a married man?"

"Oh, yes."

"Yet you never took your wife to see her. Why was that?"

For the first time, Leonard Vole's answer came halting and uncertain.

"Well—I don't know."

"Are you aware that Janet Mackenzie says her mistress believed you to be single, and contemplated marrying you in the future?"

Vole laughed. "Absurd! There was forty years' difference in age between us."

"It has been done," said the solicitor dryly. "The fact remains. Your wife never met Miss French?"

"No—" Again the constraint.

"You will permit me to say," said the lawyer, "that I hardly understand your attitude in the matter."

Vole flushed, hesitated, and then spoke.

"I'll make a clean breast of it. I was hard up, as you know. I hoped that Miss French might lend me some money. She was fond of me, but she wasn't at all interested in the struggles of a young couple. Early on, I found that she had taken it for granted that my wife and I didn't get on—were living apart. Mr. Mayherne—I wanted the money—for Romaine's sake. I said nothing, and allowed the old lady to think what she chose. She spoke of my being an adopted son to her. There was never any question of marriage—that must be just Janet's imagination."

"And that is all?"

"Yes—that is all."

Was there just a shade of hesitation in the words? The lawyer fancied so. He rose and held out his hand.

"Good-by, Mr. Vole." He looked into the haggard young face and spoke with an unusual impulse. "I believe in your innocence in spite of the multitude of facts arrayed against you. I hope to prove it and vindicate you completely."

Vole smiled back at him.

"You'll find the alibi is all right," he said cheerfully.

Again he hardly noticed that the other did not respond.

"The whole thing hinges a good deal on the testimony of Janet Mackenzie," said Mr. Mayherne. "She hates you. That much is clear."

"She can hardly hate me," protested the young man.

The solicitor shook his head as he went out. *Now for Mrs. Vole*, he said to himself. He was seriously disturbed by the way the thing was shaping.

The Voles lived in a small shabby house near Paddington Green. It was to this house that Mr. Mayherne went.

In answer to his ring, a big slatternly woman, obviously a charwoman, answered the door.

"Mrs. Vole? Has she returned yet?"

"Got back an hour ago. But I dunno if you can see her."

"If you will take my card to her," said Mr. Mayherne quietly, "I am quite sure that she will do so."

The woman looked at him doubtfully, wiped her hand on her apron, and took the card. Then she closed the door in his face and left him on the step outside.

In a few minutes, however, she returned with a slightly altered manner.

"Come inside, please."

She ushered him into a tiny drawing-room. Mr. Mayherne, examining a drawing on the wall, started up suddenly to face a tall, pale woman who had entered so quietly that he had not heard her.

"Mr. Mayherne? You are my husband's solicitor, are you not? You have come from him? Will you please sit down?"

Until she spoke he had not realized that she was not English. Now, observing her more closely, he noticed the high cheekbones, the dense blue-black of the hair, and an occasional very slight movement of the hands that was distinctly foreign. A strange woman, very quiet. So quiet as to make one uneasy. From the very first Mr. Mayherne was conscious that he was up against something that he did not understand.

"Now, my dear Mrs. Vole," he began, "you must not give way—"

He stopped. It was so very obvious that Romaine Vole had not the slightest intention of giving way. She was perfectly calm and composed.

"Will you please tell me about it?" she said. "I must know everything. Do not think to spare me. I want to know the worst." She hesitated, then repeated in a lower tone, with a curious emphasis which the lawyer did not understand, "I want to know the worst."

Mr. Mayherne went over his interview with Leonard Vole. She listened attentively, nodding her head now and then.

"I see," she said, when he had finished. "He wants me to say that he came in at twenty minutes past nine that night?"

"He did come in at that time?" said Mr. Mayherne sharply.

"That is not the point," she said coldly. "Will my saying so acquit him? Will they believe me?"

Mr. Mayherne was taken aback. She had gone so quickly to the core of the matter.

"That is what I want to know," she said. "Will it be enough? Is there anyone else who can support my evidence?"

There was a suppressed eagerness in her manner that made him vaguely uneasy.

"So far there is no one else," he said reluctantly.

"I see," said Romaine Vole.

She sat for a minute or two perfectly still. A little smile played over her lips.

The lawyer's feeling of alarm grew stronger and stronger.

"Mrs. Vole—" he began. "I know what you must feel—"

"Do you?" she asked. "I wonder."

"In the circumstances—"

"In the circumstances—I intend to play a lone hand."

He looked at her in dismay.

"But, my dear Mrs. Vole—you are overwrought. Being so devoted to your husband—"

"I beg your pardon?"

The sharpness of her voice made him start. He repeated in a hesitating manner, "Being so devoted to your husband—"

Romaine Vole nodded slowly, the same strange smile on her lips.

"Did he tell you that I was devoted to him?" she asked softly. "Ah! yes, I can see he did. How stupid men are! Stupid—stupid—stupid—"

She rose suddenly to her feet. All the intense emotion that the lawyer had been conscious of in the atmosphere was now concentrated in her tone.

"I hate him, I tell you! I hate him. I hate him. I hate him! I would like to see him hanged by the neck till he is dead."

The lawyer recoiled before her and the smoldering passion in her eyes. She advanced a step nearer and continued vehemently.

"Perhaps I shall see it. Supposing I tell you that he did not come in that night at twenty past nine, but at twenty past ten? You say that he tells you he knew nothing about the money coming to him. Supposing I tell you he knew all about it, and counted on it, and committed murder to get it? Supposing I tell you that he admitted to me that night when he came in what he had done? That there was blood on his coat? What then? Supposing that I stand up in court and say all these things?"

Her eyes seemed to challenge him. With an effort he concealed his growing dismay, and endeavored to speak in a rational tone.

"You cannot be asked to give evidence against your husband—"

"He is not my husband!"

The words came out so quickly that he fancied he had misunderstood her.

"I beg your pardon? I—"

"He is not my husband."

The silence was so intense that you could have heard a pin drop.

"I was an actress in Vienna. My husband is alive but in a madhouse. So we could not marry. I am glad now." She nodded defiantly.

"I should like you to tell me one thing," said Mr. Mayherne. He contrived to appear as cool and unemotional as ever. "Why are you so bitter against Leonard Vole?"

She shook her head, smiling a little.

"Yes, you would like to know. But I shall not tell you. I will keep my secret."

Mr. Mayherne gave his dry little cough and rose.

"There seems no point in prolonging this interview," he remarked. "You will hear from me again after I have communicated with my client."

She came closer to him, looking into his eyes with her own wonderful dark ones.

"Tell me," she said, "did you believe—honestly—that he was innocent when you came here today?"

"I did," said Mr. Mayherne.

"You poor little man." She laughed.

"And I believe so still," finished the lawyer. "Good evening, madam."

He went out of the room, taking with him the memory of her startled face. *This is going to be the devil of a business*, said Mr. Mayherne to himself as he strode along the street.

Extraordinary, the whole thing. An extraordinary woman. A very dangerous woman. Women were the devil when they got their knife into you.

What was to be done? That wretched young man hadn't a leg to stand upon. Of course, possibly he did commit the crime.

No, said Mr. Mayherne to himself. *No—there's almost too much evidence against him. I don't believe this woman. She was trumping up the whole story. But she'll never bring it into court.*

He wished he felt more conviction on the point.

The police court proceedings were brief and dramatic. The principal witnesses for the prosecution were Janet Mackenzie, maid to the dead woman, and Romaine Heilger, Austrian subject, the mistress of the prisoner.

Mr. Mayherne sat in court and listened to the damning story that the latter told. It was on the lines she had indicated to him in their interview.

The prisoner reserved his defense and was committed for trial.

Mr. Mayherne was at his wits' end. The case against Leonard Vole was black beyond words. Even the famous K.C. who was engaged for the defense held out little hope.

"If we can shake that Austrian woman's testimony, we might do something," he said dubiously. "But it's a bad business."

Mr. Mayherne had concentrated his energies on one single point. Assuming Leonard Vole to be speaking the truth, and to have left the murdered woman's house at nine o'clock, who was the man Janet heard talking to Miss French at half past nine?

The only ray of light was in the shape of a scapegrace nephew who had in bygone days cajoled and threatened his aunt out of various sums of money. Janet Mackenzie, the solicitor learned, had always been attached to this young man, and had never ceased urging his claims upon her mistress. It certainly seemed possible that it was this nephew who had been with Miss French after Leonard Vole left, especially as he was not to be found in any of his old haunts.

In all other directions, the lawyer's researches had been negative in their result. No one had seen Leonard Vole entering his own house, or leaving that of Miss French. No one had seen any other man enter or leave the house in Cricklewood. All inquiries drew blank.

It was the eve of the trial when Mr. Mayherne received the letter which was to lead his thoughts in an entirely new direction.

It came by the six-o'clock post. An illiterate scrawl, written on common paper and enclosed in a dirty envelope with the stamp stuck on crooked.

Mr. Mayherne read it through once or twice before he grasped its meaning.

Dear Mister:

Youre the lawyer chap wot acts for the young feller. If you want that painted foreign hussy showd up for wot she is an her pack of lies you come to 16 Shaw's Rents Stepney to-night It ull cawst you 2 hundred quid Arsk for Missis Mogson.

The solicitor read and reread this strange epistle. It might, of course, be a hoax, but when he thought it over, he became increasingly convinced that it was genuine, and also convinced that it was the one hope for the prisoner. The evidence of Romaine Heilger damned him completely, and the line the defense meant to pursue, the line that the evidence of a woman who had admittedly lived an immoral life was not to be trusted, was at best a weak one.

Mr. Mayherne's mind was made up. It was his duty to save his client at all costs. He must go to Shaw's Rents.

He had some difficulty in finding the place, a ramshackle building in an evil-smelling slum, but at last he did so, and on inquiry for Mrs. Mogson was sent up to a room on the third floor. On this door he knocked, and getting no answer, knocked again.

At this second knock, he heard a shuffling sound inside, and presently the door was opened cautiously half an inch and a bent figure peered out.

Suddenly the woman, for it was a woman, gave a chuckle and opened the door wider.

"So it's you, dearie," she said, in a wheezy voice. "Nobody with you, is there? No playing tricks? That's right. You can come in—you can come in."

With some reluctance the lawyer stepped across the threshold into the small, dirty room, with its flickering gas jet. There was an untidy unmade bed in a corner, a plain deal table, and two rickety chairs. For the first time Mr. Mayherne had a full view of the tenant of this unsavory apartment. She was a woman of middle age, bent in figure, with a mass of untidy gray hair and a scarf wound tightly round her face. She saw him looking at this and laughed again, the same curious, toneless chuckle.

"Wondering why I hide my beauty, dear? He, he, he. Afraid it may tempt you, eh? But you shall see—you shall see."

She drew aside the scarf, and the lawyer recoiled involuntarily before the almost formless blur of scarlet. She replaced the scarf again.

"So you're not wanting to kiss me, dearie? He, he, I don't wonder. And yet I was a pretty girl once—not so long ago as you'd think, either. Vitriol, dearie, vitriol—that's what did that. Ah! but I'll be even with 'em—"

She burst into a hideous torrent of profanity which Mr. Mayherne tried vainly to quell. She fell silent at last, her hands clenching and unclenching themselves nervously.

"Enough of that," said the lawyer sternly. "I've come here because I have reason to believe you can give me information which will clear my client, Leonard Vole. Is that the case?"

Her eyes leered at him cunningly.

"What about the money, dearie?" she wheezed. "Two hundred quid, you remember."

"It is your duty to give evidence, and you can be called upon to do so."

"That won't do, dearie. I'm an old woman, and I know nothing. But you give me two hundred quid, and perhaps I can give you a hint or two. See?"

"What kind of hint?"

"What should you say to a letter? A letter from *her*. Never mind how I got hold of it. That's my business. It'll do the trick. But I want my two hundred quid."

Mr. Mayherne looked at her coldly, and made up his mind.

"I'll give you ten pounds, nothing more. And only that if this letter is what you say it is."

"Ten pounds?" She screamed and raved at him.

"Twenty," said Mr. Mayherne, "and that's my last word."

He rose as if to go. Then, watching her closely, he drew out a pocketbook, and counted out twenty one-pound notes.

"You see," he said. "That is all I have with me. You can take it or leave it."

But already he knew that the sight of the money was too much for her. She cursed and raved impotently, but at last she gave in. Going over to the bed, she drew something out from beneath the tattered mattress.

"Here you are, damn you!" she snarled. "It's the top one you want."

It was a bundle of letters that she threw to him, and Mr. Mayherne untied them and scanned them in his usual cool, methodical manner. The woman, watching him eagerly, could gain no clue from his impassive face.

He read each letter through, then returned again to the top one and read it a second time. Then he tied the whole bundle up again carefully.

They were love letters, written by Romaine Heilger, and the man they were written to was not Leonard Vole. The top letter was dated the day of the latter's arrest.

"I spoke true, dearie, didn't I?" whined the woman. "It'll do for her, that letter?"

Mr. Mayherne put the letters in his pocket, then he asked a question.

"How did you get hold of this correspondence?"

"That's telling," she said with a leer. "But I know something more. I heard in court what that hussy said. Find out where she was at twenty past ten, the time she says she was at home. Ask at the Lion Road Cinema. They'll remember—a fine upstanding girl like that—curse her!"

"Who is the man?" asked Mr. Mayherne. "There's only a Christian name here."

The other's voice grew thick and hoarse, her hands clenched and unclenched. Finally she lifted one to her face.

"He's the man that did this to me. Many years ago now. She took him away from me—a chit of a girl she was then. And when I went after him—and went for him, too—he threw the cursed stuff at me! And she laughed—damn her! I've had it in for her for years. Followed her, I have, spied upon her. And now I've got her! She'll suffer for this, won't she, Mr. Lawyer? She'll suffer?"

"She will probably be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for perjury," said Mr. Mayherne quietly.

"Shut away—that's what I want. You're going, are you? Where's my money? Where's that good money?"

Without a word, Mr. Mayherne put down the notes on the table. Then, drawing a deep breath, he turned and left the squalid room. Looking back, he saw the old woman crooning over the money.

He wasted no time. He found the cinema in Lion Road easily enough, and, shown a photograph of Romaine Heilger, the commissionaire recognized her

at once. She had arrived at the cinema with a man some time after ten o'clock on the evening in question. He had not noticed her escort particularly, but he remembered the lady who had spoken to him about the picture that was showing. They stayed until the end, about an hour later.

Mr. Mayherne was satisfied. Romaine Heilger's evidence was a tissue of lies from beginning to end. She had evolved it out of her passionate hatred. The lawyer wondered whether he would ever know what lay behind that hatred. What had Leonard Vole done to her? He had seemed dumfounded when the solicitor had reported her attitude to him. He had declared earnestly that such a thing was incredible—yet it had seemed to Mr. Mayherne that after the first astonishment his protests had lacked sincerity.

He did know. Mr. Mayherne was convinced of it. He knew, but he had no intention of revealing the fact. The secret between those two remained a secret. Mr. Mayherne wondered if some day he should come to learn what it was.

The solicitor glanced at his watch. It was late, but time was everything. He hailed a taxi and gave an address.

"Sir Charles must know of this at once," he murmured to himself as he got in.

The trial of Leonard Vole for the murder of Emily French aroused widespread interest. In the first place the prisoner was young and good-looking, then he was accused of a particularly dastardly crime, and there was the further interest of Romaine Heilger, the principal witness for the prosecution. There had been pictures of her in many papers, and several fictitious stories as to her origin and history.

The proceedings opened quietly enough. Various technical evidence came first. Then Janet Mackenzie was called. She told substantially the same story as before. In cross-examination counsel for the defense succeeded in getting her to contradict herself once or twice over her account of Vole's association with Miss French; he emphasized the fact that though she had heard a man's voice in the sitting-room that night, there was nothing to show that it was Vole who was there, and he managed to drive home a feeling that jealousy and dislike of the prisoner were at the bottom of a good deal of her evidence.

Then the next witness was called.

"Your name is Romaine Heilger?"

"Yes."

"You are an Austrian subject?"

"Yes."

"For the last three years you have lived with the prisoner and passed yourself off as his wife?"

Just for a moment Romaine Heilger's eyes met those of the man in the dock. Her expression held something curious and unfathomable.

"Yes."

The questions went on. Word by word the damning facts came out. On the night in question the prisoner had taken out a crowbar with him. He had returned at twenty minutes past ten, and had confessed to having killed the old lady. His cuffs had been stained with blood, and he had burned them in the kitchen stove. He had terrorized her into silence by means of threats.

As the story proceeded, the feeling of the court which had, to begin with, been slightly favorable to the prisoner, now set dead against him. He himself sat with downcast head and moody air, as though he knew he were doomed.

Yet it might have been noted that her own counsel sought to restrain Romaine's animosity. He would have preferred her to be more unbiased.

Formidable and ponderous, counsel for the defense arose.

He put it to her that her story was a malicious fabrication from start to finish, that she had not even been in her own house at the time in question, that she was in love with another man and was deliberately seeking to send Vole to his death for a crime he did not commit.

Romaine denied these allegations with superb insolence.

Then came the surprising denouement, the production of the letter. It was read aloud in court in the midst of a breathless stillness.

"Max, beloved, the Fates have delivered him into our hands! He has been arrested for murder—but, yes, the murder of an old lady! Leonard, who would not hurt a fly! At last I shall have my revenge. The poor chicken! I shall say that he came in that night with blood upon him—that he confessed to me. I shall hang him, Max—and when he hangs he will know and realize that it was Romaine who sent him to his death. And then—happiness, Beloved! Happiness at last!"

There were experts present ready to swear that the handwriting was that of Romaine Heilger, but they were not needed. Confronted with the letter, Romaine broke down utterly and confessed everything. Leonard Vole had returned to the house at the time he said, twenty past nine. She had invented the whole story to ruin him.

With the collapse of Romaine Heilger, the case for the Crown collapsed also. Sir Charles called his few witnesses, the prisoner himself went into the box and told his story in a manly straightforward manner, unshaken by cross-examination.

The prosecution endeavored to rally, but without great success. The judge's summing up was not wholly favorable to the prisoner, but a reaction had set in and the jury needed little time to consider their verdict.

"We find the prisoner not guilty."

Leonard Vole was free!

Little Mr. Mayherne hurried from his seat. He must congratulate his client.

He found himself polishing his pince-nez vigorously, and checked himself. His wife had told him only the night before that he was getting a habit of it. Curious things, habits. People themselves never knew they had them.

An interesting case—a very interesting case. That woman, now, Romaine Heilger.

The case was dominated for him still by the exotic figure of Romaine Heilger. She had seemed a pale, quiet woman in the house at Paddington, but in court she had flamed out against the sober background, flaunting herself like a tropical flower.

If he closed his eyes he could see her now, tall and vehement, her exquisite body bent forward a little, her right hand clenching and unclenching itself unconsciously all the time.

Curious things, habits. That gesture of hers with the hand was her habit, he supposed. Yet he had seen someone else do it quite lately. Who was it now? Quite lately—

He drew in his breath with a gasp as it came back to him. The woman in Shaw's Rents—

He stood still, his head whirling. It was impossible—impossible— Yet, Romaine Heilger was an actress.

The K.C. came up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Congratulated our man yet? He's had a narrow shave, you know. Come along and see him."

But the little lawyer shook off the other's hand.

He wanted one thing only—to see Romaine Heilger face to face.

He did not see her until some time later, and the place of their meeting is not relevant.

"So you guessed," she said, when he had told her all that was in his mind. "The face? Oh! that was easy enough, and the light of that gas jet was too bad for you to see the make-up."

"But why—why—"

"Why did I play a lone hand?" She smiled a little, remembering the last time she had used the words.

"Such an elaborate comedy!"

"My friend—I had to save him. The evidence of a woman devoted to him would not have been enough—you hinted as much yourself. But I know something of the psychology of crowds. Let my evidence be wrung from me, as an admission, damning me in the eyes of the law, and a reaction in favor of the prisoner would immediately set in."

"And the bundle of letters?"

"One alone, the vital one, might have seemed like a—what do you call it?—put-up job."

"Then the man called Max?"

"Never existed, my friend."

"I still think," said little Mr. Mayherne, in an aggrieved manner, "that we could have got him off by the—er—normal procedure."

"I dared not risk it. You see you thought he was innocent—"

"And you knew it? I see," said little Mr. Mayherne.

"My dear Mr. Mayherne," said Romaine, "you do not see at all. I knew—he was guilty!"

Philomel Cottage

"GOOD-BY, DARLING."

"Good-by, sweetheart."

Alix Martin stood leaning over the small rustic gate, watching the retreating figure of her husband, as he walked down the road in the direction of the village.

Presently he turned a bend and was lost to sight, but Alix still stayed in the same position, absent-mindedly smoothing a lock of the rich brown hair which had blown across her face, her eyes faraway and dreamy.

Alix Martin was not beautiful, nor even, strictly speaking, pretty. But her face, the face of a woman no longer in her first youth, was irradiated and softened until her former colleagues of the old office days would hardly have recognized her. Miss Alix King had been a trim businesslike young woman, efficient, slightly brusque in manner, obviously capable and matter-of-fact. She had made the least, not the most, of her beautiful brown hair. Her mouth, not ungenerous in its lines, had always been severely compressed. Her clothes had been neat and suitable, without a hint of coquetry.

Alix had graduated in a hard school. For fifteen years, from the age of eighteen until she was thirty-three, she had kept herself (and for seven years of the time, an invalid mother) by her work as a shorthand-typist. It was the struggle for existence which had hardened the soft lines of her girlish face.

True, there had been romance—of a kind. Dick Windyford, a fellow clerk. Very much of a woman at heart, Alix had always known without seeming to know that he cared. Outwardly they had been friends, nothing more. Out of his slender salary, Dick had been hard put to it to provide for the schooling of a younger brother. For the moment, he could not think of marriage. Nevertheless, when Alix envisaged the future, it was with the half acknowledged certainty that she would one day be Dick's wife. They cared for one another, so she would have put it, but they were both sensible people. Plenty of time, no need to do anything rash. So the years had gone on.

And then suddenly deliverance from daily toil had come to the girl in the most unexpected manner. A distant cousin had died leaving her money to Alix. A few thousand pounds, enough to bring in a couple of hundred a year. To Alix, it was freedom, life, independence. Now she and Dick need wait no longer.

But Dick reacted unexpectedly. He had never directly spoken of his love

to Alix, now he seemed less inclined to do so than ever. He avoided her, became morose and gloomy. Alix was quick to realize the truth. She had become a woman of means. Delicacy and pride stood in the way of Dick's asking her to be his wife.

She liked him none the worse for it and was indeed deliberating as to whether she herself might not take the first step when for the second time the unexpected descended upon her.

She met Gerald Martin at a friend's house. He fell violently in love with her and within a week they were engaged. Alix, who had always considered herself "not the falling-in-love kind," was swept clean off her feet.

Unwittingly she had found the way to arouse her former lover. Dick Windyford had come to her stammering with rage and anger.

"The man's a perfect stranger to you. You know nothing about him."

"I know that I love him."

"How can you know—in a week?"

"It doesn't take everyone eleven years to find out that they're in love with a girl," cried Alix angrily.

His face went white.

"I've cared for you ever since I met you. I thought that you cared, also."

Alix was truthful.

"I thought so, too," she admitted. "But that was because I didn't know what love was."

Then Dick had burst out again. Prayers, entreaties, even threats. Threats against the man who had supplanted him. It was amazing to Alix to see the volcano that existed beneath the reserved exterior of the man she thought she knew so well. Also, it frightened her a little. Dick, of course, couldn't possibly mean the things he was saying, the threats of vengeance against Gerald Martin. He was angry, that was all.

Her thoughts had gone back to that interview now, on this sunny morning, as she leaned on the gate of the cottage. She had been married a month, and she was idyllically happy. Yet, in the momentary absence of the husband who was everything to her, a tinge of anxiety invaded her perfect happiness, and the cause of that anxiety was Dick Windyford.

Three times since her marriage she had dreamed the same dream. The environment differed, but the main facts were always the same. She saw her husband lying dead and Dick Windyford standing over him, and she knew clearly and distinctly that his was the hand which had dealt the fatal blow.

But horrible though that was, there was something more horrible still—horrible that was, on awakening, for in the dream it seemed perfectly natural and inevitable. *She, Alix Martin, was glad that her husband was dead*—she stretched out grateful hands to the murderer, sometimes she thanked him.

The dream always ended the same way, with herself clasped in Dick Windyford's arms.

She had said nothing of this dream to her husband, but secretly it had perturbed her more than she liked to admit. Was it a warning—a warning against Dick Windyford? Had he some secret power which he was trying to establish over her at a distance? She did not know much about hypnotism, but surely she had always heard that persons could not be hypnotized against their will.

Alix was roused from her thoughts by the sharp ringing of the telephone bell from within the house. She entered the cottage and picked up the receiver. Suddenly she swayed, and put out a hand to keep herself from falling.

"Who did you say was speaking?"

"Why, Alix, what's the matter with your voice? I wouldn't have known it. It's Dick."

"Oh!" said Alix—"Oh! Where are you?"

"At the Traveler's Arms—that's the right name, isn't it? Or don't you even know of the existence of your village pub? I'm on my holiday—doing a bit of fishing here. Any objection to my looking you two good people up this evening after dinner?"

"No," said Alix sharply. "You mustn't come."

There was a pause, and Dick's voice, with a subtle alteration in it, spoke again.

"I beg your pardon," he said formally. "Of course I won't bother you—"

Alix broke in hastily. Of course he must think her behavior too extraordinary. It was extraordinary. Her nerves must be all to pieces. It wasn't Dick's fault that she had these dreams.

"I only meant that we were—engaged tonight," she explained, trying to make her voice sound as natural as possible. "Won't you—won't you come to dinner tomorrow night?"

But Dick evidently noticed the lack of cordiality in her tone.

"Thanks very much," he said, in the same formal voice. "But I may be moving on any time. Depends upon whether a pal of mine turns up or not. Good-by, Alix." He paused, and then added hastily, in a different tone, "Best of luck to you, my dear."

Alix hung up the receiver with a feeling of relief.

He mustn't come here, she repeated to herself. *He mustn't come here. Oh! what a fool I am! To imagine myself into a state like this. All the same, I'm glad he's not coming.*

She caught up a rustic rush hat from a table, and passed out into the garden again, pausing to look up at the name carved over the porch, *Philomel Cottage*.

"Isn't it a very fanciful name?" she had said to Gerald once before they were married. He had laughed.

"You little Cockney," he had said, affectionately. "I don't believe you have ever heard a nightingale. I'm glad you haven't. Nightingales should sing only for lovers. We'll hear them together on a summer's evening outside our own home."

And at the remembrance of how they had indeed heard them, Alix, standing in the doorway of her home, blushed happily.

It was Gerald who had found Philomel Cottage. He had come to Alix bursting with excitement. He had found the very spot for them—unique—a gem—the chance of a lifetime. And when Alix had seen it, she, too, was captivated. It was true that the situation was rather lonely—they were two miles from the nearest village—but the cottage itself was so exquisite with its Old World appearance, and its solid comfort of bathrooms, hot-water system, electric light, and telephone, that she fell a victim to its charm immediately. And then a hitch occurred. The owner, a rich man who had made it his whim, declined to rent it. He would only sell.

Gerald Martin, though possessed of a good income, was unable to touch his capital. He could raise at most a thousand pounds. The owner was asking three. But Alix, who had set her heart on the place, came to the rescue. Her own capital was easily realized, being in bearer bonds. She would contribute half of it to the purchase of the home. So Philomel Cottage became their very own, and never for a minute had Alix regretted the choice. It was true that servants did not appreciate the rural solitude—indeed at the moment they had none at all—but Alix, who had been starved of domestic life, thoroughly enjoyed cooking dainty little meals and looking after the house.

The garden which was magnificently stocked with flowers was attended to by an old man from the village who came twice a week, and Gerald Martin, who was keen on gardening, spent most of his time there.

As she rounded the corner of the house, Alix was surprised to see the old gardener in question busy over the flower beds. She was surprised because his days for work were Mondays and Fridays, and today was Wednesday.

"Why, George, what are you doing here?" she asked, as she came toward him.

The old man straightened up with a chuckle, touching the brim of an aged cap.

"I thought as how you'd be surprised, ma'am. But 'tis this way. There be a fete over to Squire's on Friday, and I sez to myself, I sez, neith Mr. Martin nor yet his good lady won't take it amiss if I comes for once on a Wednesday instead of a Friday."

"That's quite all right," said Alix. "I hope you'll enjoy yourself at the fete."

"I reckon to," said George simply. "It's a fine thing to be able to eat your

fill and know all the time as it's not you as is paying for it. Squire allus has a proper sit-down tea for 'is tenants. Then I thought, too, ma'am, as I might as well see you before you goes away so as to learn your wishes for the borders. You'll have no idea when you'll be back, ma'am, I suppose?"

"But I'm not going away."

George stared at her.

"Bain't you going to Lunnon tomorrow?"

"No. What put such an idea into your head?"

George jerked his head over his shoulder.

"Met Maister down to village yesterday. He told me you was both going away to Lunnon tomorrow, and it was uncertain when you'd be back again."

"Nonsense," said Alix, laughing. "You must have misunderstood him."

All the same, she wondered exactly what it could have been that Gerald had said to lead the old man into such a curious mistake. Going to London? She never wanted to go to London again.

"I hate London," she said suddenly and harshly.

"Ahl" said George placidly. "I must have been mistook somehow, and yet he said it plain enough it seemed to me. I'm glad you're stopping on here—I don't hold with all this gallivanting about, and I don't think nothing of Lunnon. I've never needed to go there. Too many moty cars—that's the trouble nowadays. Once people have got a moty car, blessed if they can stay still anywheres. Mr. Ames, wot used to have this house—nice peaceful sort of gentleman he was until he bought one of them things. Hadn't 'ad it a month before he put up this cottage for sale. A tidy lot he'd spent on it, too, with taps in all the bedrooms, and the electric light and all. 'You'll never see your money back,' I sez to him. 'It's not everyone as'll have your fad for washing themselves in every room in the house, in a manner of speaking.' But 'George,' he sez to me, 'I'll get every penny of two thousand pounds for this house.' And sure enough, he did."

"He got three thousand," said Alix, smiling.

"Two thousand," repeated George. "The sum he was asking was talked of at the time. And a very high figure it was thought to be."

"It really was three thousand," said Alix.

"Women never understand figures," said George, unconvinced. "You'll not tell me that Mr. Ames had the face to stand up to you, and say three thousand brazen-like in a loud voice."

"He didn't say it to me," said Alix. "He said it to my husband."

George stooped again to his flower bed.

"The price was two thousand," he said obstinately.

Alix did not trouble to argue with him. Moving to one of the further beds, she began to pick an armful of flowers. The sunshine, the scent of the flowers, the faint hum of hurrying bees, all conspired to make the day a perfect thing.

As she moved with her fragrant posy toward the house, Alix noticed a small dark green object, peeping from between some leaves in one of the beds. She stooped and picked it up, recognizing it for her husband's pocket diary. It must have fallen from his pocket when he was weeding.

She opened it, scanning the entries with some amusement. Almost from the beginning of their married life, she had realized that the impulsive and emotional Gerald had the uncharacteristic virtues of neatness and method. He was extremely fussy about meals being punctual, and always planned his day ahead with the accuracy of a time table. This morning, for instance, he had announced that he should start for the village after breakfast—at 10:15. And at 10:15 to the minute he had left the house.

Looking through the diary, she was amused to notice the entry on the date of May 14th. *Marry Alix St. Peter's 2:30.*

"The big silly," murmured Alix to herself, turning the pages.

Suddenly she stopped.

"Wednesday, June 18th—why that's today."

In the space for that day was written in Gerald's neat precise hand: *9 p.m.* Nothing else. What had Gerald planned to do at 9 p.m. Alix wondered. She smiled to herself as she realized that had this been a story, like those she had so often read, the diary would doubtless have furnished her with some sensational revelation. It would have had in it for certain the name of another woman. She fluttered the back pages idly. There were dates, appointments, cryptic references to business deals, but only one woman's name—her own.

Yet as she slipped the book into her pocket and went on with her flowers to the house, she was aware of a vague uneasiness. Those words of Dick Windyford's recurred to her, almost as though he had been at her elbow repeating them: "The man's a perfect stranger to you. You know nothing about him."

It was true. What did she know about him? After all, Gerald was forty. In forty years there must have been women in his life.

Alix shook herself impatiently. She must not give way to these thoughts. She had a far more instant preoccupation to deal with. Should she, or should she not, tell her husband that Dick Windyford had rung her up?

There was the possibility to be considered that Gerald might have already run across him in the village. But in that case he would be sure to mention it to her immediately upon his return and matters would be taken out of her hands. Otherwise—what? Alix was aware of a distinct desire to say nothing about it. Gerald had always shown himself kindly disposed toward the other. "Poor devil," he had said once, "I believe he's just as keen on you as I am. Hard luck on him to be shelved." He had had no doubts of Alix's own feelings.

If she told him, he was sure to suggest asking Dick Windyford to Philomel Cottage. Then she would have to explain that Dick had proposed it himself, and that she had made an excuse to prevent his coming. And when he asked her why she had done so, what could she say? Tell him her dream? But he would only laugh—or, worse, see that she attached an importance to it which he did not. Then he would think—oh, he might think anything!

In the end, rather shamefacedly, Alix decided to say nothing. It was the first secret she had ever kept from her husband, and the consciousness of it made her feel ill at ease.

When she heard Gerald returning from the village shortly before lunch, she hurried into the kitchen and pretended to be busy with the cooking so as to hide her confusion.

It was evident at once that Gerald had seen nothing of Dick Windyford. Alix felt at once relieved and embarrassed. She was definitely committed now to a policy of concealment. For the rest of the day she was nervous and absent-minded, starting at every sound, but her husband seemed to notice nothing. He himself seemed to have his thoughts far away, and once or twice she had to speak a second time before he answered some trivial remark of hers.

It was not until after their simple evening meal, when they were sitting in the oak-beamed living-room with the windows thrown open to let in the sweet night air scented with the perfume of the mauve and white stocks that grew outside, that Alix remembered the pocket diary, and seized upon it gladly to distract her thoughts from their doubt and perplexity.

"Here's something you've been watering the flowers with," she said, and threw it into his lap.

"Dropped it in the border, did I?"

"Yes, I know all your secrets now."

"Not guilty," said Gerald, shaking his head.

"What about your assignation at nine o'clock tonight?"

"Oh! that—" he seemed taken back for a moment, then he smiled as though something afforded him particular amusement. "It's an assignation with a particularly nice girl, Alix. She's got brown hair and blue eyes and she's particularly like you."

"I don't understand," said Alix, with mock severity. "You're evading the point."

"No, I'm not. As a matter of fact, that's a reminder that I'm going to develop some negatives tonight, and I want you to help me."

Gerald Martin was an enthusiastic photographer. He had a somewhat old-fashioned camera, but with an excellent lens, and he developed his own plates in a small cellar which he had fitted up as a dark room. He was never tired of posing Alix in different positions.

"And it must be done at nine o'clock precisely," said Alix teasingly.

Gerald looked a little vexed.

"My dear girl," he said, with a shade of testiness in his manner, "one should always plan a thing for a definite time. Then one gets through one's work properly."

Alix sat for a minute or two in silence watching her husband as he lay in his chair smoking, his dark head flung back and the clear-cut lines of his clean-shaven face showing up against the somber background. And suddenly, from some unknown source, a wave of panic surged over her, so that she cried out before she could stop herself. "Oh! Gerald, I wish I knew more about you."

Her husband turned an astonished face upon her.

"But, my dear Alix, you do know all about me. I've told you of my boyhood in Northumberland, of my life in South Africa, and these last ten years in Canada which have brought me success."

"Oh, business!"

Gerald laughed suddenly.

"I know what you mean—love affairs. You women are all the same. Nothing interests you but the personal element."

Alix felt her throat go dry, as she muttered indistinctly, "Well, but there must have been—love affairs. I mean— If I only knew—"

There was silence again for a minute or two. Gerald Martin was frowning, a look of indecision on his face. When he spoke, it was gravely, without a trace of his former bantering manner.

"Do you think it wise, Alix—this Bluebeard's-chamber business? There have been women in my life, yes. I don't deny it. You wouldn't believe me if I did deny it. But I can swear to you truthfully that not one of them meant anything to me."

There was a ring of sincerity in his voice which comforted the listening wife.

"Satisfied, Alix?" he asked, with a smile. Then he looked at her with a shade of curiosity.

"What has turned your mind onto these unpleasant subjects tonight of all nights? You never mentioned them before."

Alix got up and began to walk about restlessly.

"Oh! I don't know," she said. "I've been nervy all day."

"That's odd," said Gerald, in a low voice, as though speaking to himself. "That's very odd."

"Why is it odd?"

"Oh, my dear girl, don't flash out at me so. I only said it was odd because as a rule you're so sweet and serene."

Alix forced a smile.

"Everything's conspired to annoy me today," she confessed. "Even old

George had got some ridiculous idea into his head that we were going away to London. He said you had told him so."

"Where did you see him?" asked Gerald sharply.

"He came to work today instead of Friday."

"The old fool," said Gerald angrily.

Alix stared in surprise. Her husband's face was convulsed with rage. She had never seen him so angry. Seeing her astonishment, Gerald made an effort to regain control of himself.

"Well, he *is* a stupid old fool," he protested.

"What can you have said to make him think that?"

"I? I never said anything. At least— Oh, yes, I remember. I made some weak joke about being 'off to London in the morning' and I suppose he took it seriously. Or else he didn't hear properly. You undeceived him, of course?"

He waited anxiously for her reply.

"Of course, but he's the sort of old man who if once he gets an idea in his head—well, it isn't so easy to get it out again."

Then she told him of the gardener's insistence on the sum asked for the cottage.

Gerald was silent for a minute or two, then he said slowly, "Ames was willing to take two thousand in cash and the remaining thousand on mortgage. That's the origin of that mistake, I fancy."

"Very likely," agreed Alix.

Then she looked up at the clock, and pointed to it with a mischievous finger.

"We ought to be getting down to it, Gerald. Five minutes behind schedule."

A very peculiar smile came over Gerald Martin's face.

"I've changed my mind," he said quietly. "I shall not do any photography tonight."

A woman's mind is a curious thing. When she went to bed that Wednesday night, Alix's mind was contented and at rest. Her momentarily assailed happiness reasserted itself, triumphant as of yore.

But by the evening of the following day, she realized that some subtle forces were at work undermining it. Dick Windyford had not rung up again, nevertheless she felt what she supposed to be his influence at work. Again and again those words of his recurred to her. "The man's a perfect stranger. You know nothing about him." And with them came the memory of her husband's face, photographed clearly on her brain as he said, "Do you think it wise, Alix, this Bluebeard's-chamber business?" Why had he said that? What had he meant by those words?

There had been warning in them—a hint of menace. It was as though he

had said in effect—“You had better not pry into my life, Alix. You may get a nasty shock if you do.” True, a few minutes later, he had sworn to her that there had been no woman in his life that mattered—but Alix tried in vain to recapture her sense of his sincerity. Was he not bound to swear that?

By Friday morning, Alix had convinced herself that there had been a woman in Gerald’s life—a Bluebeard’s chamber that he had sedulously sought to conceal from her. Her jealousy, slow to awaken, was now rampant.

Was it a woman he had been going to meet that night, at 9 p.m.? Was his story of photographs to develop a lie invented upon the spur of the moment? With a queer sense of shock Alix realized that ever since she had found that pocket diary she had been in torment. And there had been nothing in it. That was the irony of the whole thing.

Three days ago she would have sworn that she knew her husband through and through. Now it seemed to her that he was a stranger of whom she knew nothing. She remembered his unreasonable anger against old George, so at variance with his usual good-tempered manner. A small thing, perhaps, but it showed her that she did not really know the man who was her husband.

There were several little things required on Friday from the village to carry them over the week-end. In the afternoon Alix suggested that she should go for them while Gerald remained in the garden, but somewhat to her surprise he opposed this plan vehemently, and insisted on going himself while she remained at home. Alix was forced to give way to him, but his insistence surprised and alarmed her. Why was he so anxious to prevent her going to the village?

Suddenly an explanation suggested itself to her which made the whole thing clear. Was it not possible that, while saying nothing to her, Gerald had indeed come across Dick Windyford? Her own jealousy, entirely dormant at the time of their marriage, had only developed afterward. Might it not be the same with Gerald? Might he not be anxious to prevent her seeing Dick Windyford again? This explanation was so consistent with the facts, and so comforting to Alix’s perturbed mind, that she embraced it eagerly.

Yet when tea time had come and passed, she was restless and ill at ease. She was struggling with a temptation that had assailed her ever since Gerald’s departure. Finally, pacifying her conscience with the assurance that the room did need a thorough tidying, she went upstairs to her husband’s dressing-room. She took a duster with her to keep up the pretense of housewifery.

If I were only sure, she repeated to herself. *If I could only be sure.*

In vain she told herself that anything compromising would have been destroyed ages ago. Against that she argued that men do sometimes keep the most damning piece of evidence through an exaggerated sentimentality.

In the end Alix succumbed. Her cheeks burning with the shame of her action, she hunted breathlessly through packets of letters and documents,

turned out the drawers, even went through the pockets of her husband's clothes. Only two drawers eluded her—the lower drawer of the chest of drawers and the small right-hand drawer of the writing desk were both locked. But Alix was by now lost to all shame. In one of those drawers she was convinced that she would find evidence of this imaginary woman of the past who obsessed her.

She remembered that Gerald had left his keys lying carelessly on the sideboard downstairs. She fetched them and tried them one by one. The third key fitted the writing table drawer. Alix pulled it open eagerly. There was a check book and a wallet well stuffed with notes, and at the back of the drawer a packet of letters tied up with a piece of tape.

Her breath coming unevenly, Alix untied the tape. Then a deep burning blush overspread her face, and she dropped the letters back into the drawer, closing and relocking it. For the letters were her own, written to Gerald Martin before she married him.

She turned now to the chest of drawers, more with a wish to feel that she had left nothing undone, than from any expectation of finding what she sought. She was ashamed and almost convinced of the madness of her obsession.

To her annoyance none of the keys on Gerald's bunch fitted the drawer in question. Not to be defeated, Alix went into the other rooms and brought back a selection of keys with her. To her satisfaction, the key of the spare room wardrobe also fitted the chest of drawers. She unlocked the drawer and pulled it open. But there was nothing in it but a roll of newspaper clippings already dirty and discolored with age.

Alix breathed a sigh of relief. Nevertheless she glanced at the clippings, curious to know what subject had interested Gerald so much that he had taken the trouble to keep the dusty roll. They were nearly all American papers, dated some seven years ago, and dealing with the trial of the notorious swindler and bigamist, Charles LeMaitre. LeMaitre had been suspected of doing away with his women victims. A skeleton had been found beneath the floor of one of the houses he had rented, and most of the women he had "married" had never been heard of again.

He had defended himself from the charge with consummate skill, aided by some of the best legal talent in the United States. The Scottish verdict of "Non proven" might perhaps have stated the case best. In its absence, he was found Not Guilty on the capital charge, though sentenced to a long term of imprisonment on the other charges preferred against him.

Alix remembered the excitement caused by the case at the time, and also the sensation aroused by the escape of LeMaitre some three years later. He had never been recaptured. The personality of the man and his extraordinary power over women had been discussed at great length in the English papers

at the time, together with an account of his excitability in court, his passionate protestations, and his occasional sudden physical collapses, due to the fact that he had a weak heart, though the ignorant accredited it to his dramatic powers.

There was a picture of him in one of the clippings Alix held, and she studied it with some interest—a long-bearded, scholarly looking gentleman. It reminded her of someone, but for the moment she could not tell who that someone was. She had never known that Gerald took an interest in crime and famous trials, though she knew that it was a hobby with many men.

Who was it the face reminded her of? Suddenly, with a shock, she realized that it was Gerald himself. The eyes and brows bore a strong resemblance to him. Perhaps he had kept the cutting for that reason. Her eyes went on to the paragraph beside the picture. Certain dates, it seemed, had been entered in the accused's pocketbook, and it was contended that these were dates when he had done away with his victims. Then a woman gave evidence and identified the prisoner positively by the fact that he had a mole on his left wrist, just below the palm of the left hand.

Alix dropped the papers from a nerveless hand, and swayed as she stood. *On his left wrist, just below the palm, Gerald had a small scar—*

The room whirled round her. Afterward it struck her as strange that she should have leaped at once to such absolute certainty. Gerald Martin was Charles LeMaitre! She knew it and accepted it in a flash. Disjointed fragments whirled through her brain, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fitting into place.

The money paid for the house—her money—her money only. The bearer bonds she had entrusted to his keeping. Even her dream appeared in its true significance. Deep down in her, her subconscious self had always feared Gerald Martin and wished to escape from him. And it was to Dick Windyford this self of hers had looked for help. That, too, was why she was able to accept the truth so easily, without doubt or hesitation. She was to have been another of LeMaitre's victims. Very soon, perhaps.

A half cry escaped her as she remembered something. Wednesday 9 p.m. The cellar, with the flagstones that were so easily raised. Once before, he had buried one of his victims in a cellar. It had been all planned for Wednesday night. But to write it down beforehand in that methodical manner—insanity! No, it was logical. Gerald always made a memorandum of his engagements—murder was, to him, a business proposition like any other.

But what had saved her? What could possibly have saved her? Had he relented at the last minute? No—in a flash the answer came to her. Old George. She understood now her husband's uncontrollable anger. Doubtless he had paved the way by telling everyone he met that they were going to London the next day. Then George had come to work unexpectedly, had

mentioned London to her, and she had contradicted the story. Too risky to do away with her that night, with old George repeating that conversation. But what an escape! If she had not happened to mention that trivial matter—Alix shuddered.

But there was no time to be lost. She must get away at once—before he came back. For nothing on earth would she spend another night under the same roof with him. She hurriedly replaced the roll of clippings in the drawer, shut it to and locked it.

And then she stayed motionless as though frozen to stone. She had heard the creak of the gate into the road. Her husband had returned.

For a moment Alix stayed as though petrified, then she crept on tiptoe to the window, looking out from behind the shelter of the curtain.

Yes, it was her husband. He was smiling to himself and humming a little tune. In his hand he held an object which almost made the terrified girl's heart stop beating. It was a brand new spade.

Alix leaped to a knowledge born of instinct. *It was to be tonight.*

But there was still a chance. Gerald, still humming his little tune, went round to the back of the house.

He's going to put it in the cellar—ready, thought Alix with a shiver.

Without hesitating a moment, she ran down the stairs and out of the cottage. But just as she emerged from the door, her husband came round the other side of the house.

"Hullo," he said. "Where are you running off to in such a hurry?"

Alix strove desperately to appear calm and as usual. Her chance was gone for the moment, but if she was careful not to arouse his suspicions, it would come again later. Even now, perhaps.

"I was going to walk to the end of the lane and back," she said, in a voice that sounded weak and uncertain to her own ears.

"Right," said Gerald, "I'll come with you."

"No—please, Gerald. I'm—nervy, headachy—I'd rather go alone."

He looked at her attentively. She fancied a momentary suspicion gleamed in his eye.

"What's the matter with you, Alix? You're pale—trembling."

"Nothing," she forced herself to be brusque—smiling. "I've got a headache, that's all. A walk will do me good."

"Well, it's no good your saying you don't want me," declared Gerald with his easy laugh. "I'm coming whether you want me or not."

She dared not protest further. If he suspected that she knew—

With an effort she managed to regain something of her normal manner. Yet she had an uneasy feeling that he looked at her sideways every now and then, as though not quite satisfied. She felt that his suspicions were not completely allayed.

When they returned to the house, he insisted on her lying down, and brought some Eau de Cologne to bathe her temples. He was, as ever, the devoted husband, yet Alix felt herself as helpless as though bound hand and foot in a trap.

Not for a minute would he leave her alone. He went with her into the kitchen and helped her to bring in the simple cold dishes she had already prepared. Supper was a meal that choked her, yet she forced herself to eat, and even to appear gay and natural. She knew now that she was fighting for her life. She was alone with this man, miles from help, absolutely at his mercy. Her only chance was so to lull his suspicions that he would leave her alone for a few moments—long enough for her to get to the telephone in the hall and summon assistance. That was her only hope now. He would overtake her if she took to flight long before she could reach assistance.

A momentary hope flashed over her as she remembered how he had abandoned his plan before. Suppose she told him that Dick Windyford was coming up to see them that evening?

The words trembled on her lips—then she rejected them hastily. This man would not be balked a second time. There was a determination, an elation underneath his calm bearing that sickened her. She would only precipitate the crime. He would murder her there and then, and calmly ring up Dick Windyford with a tale of having been suddenly called away. Oh! if only Dick Windyford were coming to the house this evening. If Dick—

A sudden idea flashed into her mind. She looked sharply sideways at her husband as though she feared that he might read her mind. With the forming of a plan, her courage was reinforced. She became so completely natural in manner that she marveled at herself. She felt that Gerald now was completely reassured.

She made the coffee and took it out to the porch where they often sat on fine evenings.

"By the way," said Gerald suddenly, "we'll do those photographs later."

Alix felt a shiver run through her, but she replied nonchalantly, "Can't you manage alone? I'm rather tired tonight."

"It won't take long." He smiled to himself. "And I can promise you you won't be tired afterward."

The words seemed to amuse him. Alix shuddered. Now or never was the time to carry out her plan.

She rose to her feet.

"I'm just going to telephone to the butcher," she announced nonchalantly. "Don't you bother to move."

"To the butcher? At this time of night?"

"His shop's shut, of course, silly. But he's in his house all right. And tomorrow's Saturday, and I want him to bring me some veal cutlets early, be-

fore someone else grabs them from him. The old dear will do anything for me."

She passed quickly into the house, closing the door behind her. She heard Gerald say, "Don't shut the door," and was quick with her light reply. "It keeps the moths out. I hate moths. Are you afraid I'm going to make love to the butcher, silly?"

Once inside she snatched down the telephone receiver and gave the number of the Traveler's Arms. She was put through at once.

"Mr. Windyford? Is he still there? May I speak to him?"

Then her heart gave a sickening thump. The door was pushed open and her husband came into the hall.

"Do go away, Gerald," she said pettishly. "I hate anyone listening when I'm telephoning."

He merely laughed and threw himself into a chair.

"Sure it really is the butcher you're telephoning to?" he quizzed.

Alix was in despair. Her plan had failed. In a minute Dick Windyford would come to the phone. Should she risk all and cry out an appeal for help? Would he grasp what she meant before Gerald wrenched her away from the phone? Or would he merely treat it as a practical joke?

And then as she nervously depressed and released the little key in the receiver she was holding, which permits the voice to be heard or not heard at the other end, another plan flashed into her head.

"It will be difficult," she thought. "It means keeping my head, and thinking of the right words, and not faltering for a moment, but I believe I could do it. I *must* do it."

And at that minute she heard Dick Windyford's voice at the other end of the phone.

Alix drew a deep breath. Then she depressed the key firmly and spoke.

"Mrs. Martin speaking—from Philomel Cottage. *Please come* (she released the key) tomorrow morning with six nice veal cutlets (she depressed the key again) *It's very important* (she released the key) Thank you so much, Mr. Hexworthy, you don't mind my ringing you up so late, I hope, but those veal cutlets are really a matter of (she depressed the key again) *life or death . . .* (she released it) Very well—tomorrow morning—(she depressed it) *as soon as possible . . .*"

She replaced the receiver on the hook and turned to face her husband, breathing hard.

"So that's how you talk to your butcher, is it?" said Gerald.

"It's the feminine touch," said Alix lightly.

She was simmering with excitement. He had suspected nothing. Surely Dick, even if he didn't understand, would come.

She passed into the sitting-room and switched on the electric light. Gerald followed her.

"You seem very full of spirits now," he said, watching her curiously.

"Yes," said Alix, "my headache's gone."

She sat down in her usual seat and smiled at her husband, as he sank into his own chair opposite her. She was saved. It was only five and twenty past eight. Long before nine o'clock Dick would have arrived.

"I didn't think much of that coffee you gave me," complained Gerald. "It tasted very bitter."

"It's a new kind I was trying. We won't have it again if you don't like it, dear."

Alix took up a piece of needlework and began to stitch. She felt complete confidence in her own ability to keep up the part of the devoted wife. Gerald read a few pages of his book. Then he glanced up at the clock and tossed the book away.

"Half past eight. Time to go down to the cellar and start work."

The work slipped from Alix's fingers.

"Oh! Not yet. Let us wait until nine o'clock."

"No, my girl, half past eight. That's the time I fixed. You'll be able to get to bed all the earlier."

"But I'd rather wait until nine."

"Half past eight," said Gerald obstinately. "You know when I fix a time, I always stick to it. Come along, Alix. I'm not going to wait a minute longer."

Alix looked up at him, and in spite of herself she felt a wave of terror slide over her. The mask had been lifted; Gerald's hands were twitching; his eyes were shining with excitement; he was continually passing his tongue over his dry lips. He no longer cared to conceal his excitement.

Alix thought, *It's true—he can't wait—he's like a madman.*

He strode over to her, and jerked her onto her feet with a hand on her shoulder.

"Come on, my girl—or I'll carry you there."

His tone was gay, but there was an undisguised ferocity behind it that appalled her. With a supreme effort she jerked herself free and clung cowering against the wall. She was powerless. She couldn't get away—she couldn't do anything—and he was coming toward her.

"Now, Alix—"

"No—no."

She screamed, her hands held out impotently to ward him off.

"Gerald—stop—I've got something to tell you, something to confess—"

He did stop.

"To confess?" he said curiously.

"Yes, to confess." She went on desperately, seeking to hold his arrested attention. "Something I ought to have told you before."

A look of contempt swept over his face. The spell was broken.

"A former lover, I suppose," he sneered.

"No," said Alix. "Something else. You'd call it, I expect—yes, you'd call it a crime."

And at once she saw that she had struck the right note. Again his attention was arrested, held. Seeing that, her nerve came back to her. She felt mistress of the situation once more.

"You had better sit down again," she said quietly.

She herself crossed the room to her old chair and sat down. She even stooped and picked up her needlework. But behind her calmness she was thinking and inventing feverishly. For the story she invented must hold his interest until help arrived.

"I told you," she said, "that I had been a shorthand typist for fifteen years. That was not entirely true. There were two intervals. The first occurred when I was twenty-two. I came across a man, an elderly man with a little property. He fell in love with me and asked me to marry him. I accepted. We were married." She paused. "I induced him to insure his life in my favor."

She saw a sudden keen interest spring up in her husband's face, and went on with renewed assurance.

"During the war I worked for a time in a Hospital Dispensary. There I had the handling of all kinds of rare drugs and poisons. Yes, poisons."

She paused reflectively. He was keenly interested now, not a doubt of it. The murderer is bound to have an interest in murder. She had gambled on that, and succeeded. She stole a glance at the clock. It was five and twenty to nine.

"There is one poison—it is a little white powder. A pinch of it means death. You know something about poisons perhaps?"

She put the question in some trepidation. If he did, she would have to be careful.

"No," said Gerald, "I know very little about them."

She drew a breath of relief. This made her task easier.

"You have heard of Hyoscine, of course? This is a drug that acts much the same way, but it is absolutely untraceable. Any doctor would give a certificate of heart failure. I stole a small quantity of this drug and kept it by me."

She paused, marshaling her forces.

"Go on," said Gerald.

"No. I'm afraid. I can't tell you. Another time."

"Now," he said impatiently. "I want to hear."

"We had been married a month. I was very good to my elderly husband,

very kind and devoted. He spoke in praise of me to all the neighbors. Everyone knew what a devoted wife I was. I always made his coffee myself every evening. One evening, when we were alone together, I put a pinch of the deadly alkaloid in his cup."

Alix paused, and carefully rethreaded her needle. She, who had never acted in her life, rivaled the greatest actress in the world at this moment. She was actually living the part of the cold-blooded poisoner.

"It was very peaceful. I sat watching him. Once he gasped a little and asked for air. I opened the window. Then he said he could not move from his chair. Presently he died."

She stopped, smiling. It was a quarter to nine. Surely they would come soon.

"How much," said Gerald, "was the insurance money?"

"About two thousand pounds. I speculated with it, and lost it. I went back to my office work. But I never meant to remain there long. Then I met another man. I had stuck to my maiden name at the office. He didn't know I had been married before. He was a younger man, rather good-looking, and quite well off. We were married quietly in Sussex. He didn't want to insure his life, but of course he made a will in my favor. He liked me to make his coffee myself, also, just as my first husband had done." Alix smiled reflectively, and added simply, "I make very good coffee."

Then she went on.

"I had several friends in the village where we were living. They were very sorry for me, with my husband dying suddenly of heart failure one evening after dinner. I didn't quite like the doctor. I don't think he suspected me, but he was certainly very surprised at my husband's sudden death. I don't quite know why I drifted back to the office again. Habit, I suppose. My second husband left about four thousand pounds. I didn't speculate with it this time. I invested it. Then, you see—"

But she was interrupted. Gerald Martin, his face suffused with blood, half choking, was pointing a shaking forefinger at her.

"The coffee—my God! The coffee!"

She stared at him.

"I understand now why it was bitter. You devil. You've poisoned me."

His hands gripped the arms of his chair. He was ready to spring upon her.

"You've poisoned me."

Alix had retreated from him to the fireplace. Now, terrified, she opened her lips to deny—and then paused. In another minute he would spring upon her. She summoned all her strength. Her eyes held his steadily, compellingly.

"Yes," she said, "I poisoned you. Already the poison is working. At this minute you can't move from your chair—you can't move—"

If she could keep him there—even a few minutes—

Ah! what was that? Footsteps on the road. The creak of the gate. Then footsteps on the path outside. The door of the hall opened—

"You can't move," she said again.

Then she slipped past him and fled headlong from the room to fall, half fainting, into Dick Windyford's arms.

"My God! Alix!" he cried.

Then he turned to the man with him, a tall, stalwart figure in policeman's uniform.

"Go and see what's been happening in that room."

He laid Alix carefully down on a couch and bent over her.

"My little girl," he murmured. "My poor little girl. What have they been doing to you?"

Her eyelids fluttered and her lips just murmured his name.

Dick was aroused from tumultuous thoughts by the policeman's touching him on the arm.

"There's nothing in that room, sir, but a man sitting in a chair. Looks as though he'd had some kind of bad fright, and—"

"Yes?"

"Well, sir, he's—dead."

They were startled by hearing Alix's voice. She spoke as though in some kind of dream.

"And presently," she said, almost as though she were quoting from something, "he died."

Three Blind Mice

PROLOGUE

IT WAS VERY COLD. The sky was dark and heavy with unshed snow.

A man in a dark overcoat, with his muffler pulled up round his face, and his hat pulled down over his eyes, came along Culver Street and went up the steps of Number 74. He put his finger on the bell and heard it shrilling in the basement below.

Mrs. Casey, her hands busy in the sink, said bitterly:

"Drat that bell. Never any peace, there isn't."

Wheezing a little, she toiled up the basement stairs, and opened the door.

The man standing silhouetted against the lowering sky outside asked in a whisper,

"Mrs. Lyon?"

"Second floor," said Mrs. Casey. "You can go on up. Does she expect you?"

The man slowly shook his head. "Oh well, go on up and knock."

She watched him as he went up the shabbily carpeted stairs. Afterwards she said he "gave her a funny feeling." But actually all she thought was that he must have a pretty bad cold only to be able to whisper like that—and no wonder with the weather what it was.

When the man got round the bend of the staircase he began to whistle softly. The tune he whistled was *Three Blind Mice* . . .

CHAPTER I

MOLLY DAVIS STEPPED back into the road and looked up at the newly painted board by the gate.

MONKSWELL MANOR GUEST HOUSE

She nodded approval. It looked, it really did look, quite professional. Or perhaps one might say *almost* professional. The T of Guest House staggered uphill a little and the end of Manor was slightly crowded, but on the whole Giles had made a wonderful job of it. Giles was really very clever. There were so many things that he could do. She was always making fresh discoveries about this husband of hers. He said so little about himself that it was only by degrees that she was finding out what a lot of varied talents he had. An ex-naval man was always a "handy-man," so people said.

Well, Giles would have need of all his talents in their new venture. Nobody could be more raw to the business of running a guest house than she and Giles. But it would be great fun. And it did solve the housing problem.

It had been Molly's idea. When Aunt Katherine died, and the lawyers wrote to her and informed her that her aunt had left her Monkswell Manor, the natural reaction of the young couple had been to sell it. Giles had asked, "What is it like?" And Molly had replied, "Oh, a big rambling old house, full of stuffy old fashioned Victorian furniture. Rather a nice garden, but terribly overgrown since the war, because there's been only one old gardener left."

So they had decided to put the house on the market, and keep just enough furniture to furnish a small cottage or flat for themselves.

But two difficulties arose at once. First there *weren't* any small cottages or flats to be found and secondly all the furniture was enormous.

"Well," said Molly, "we'll just have to sell it *all*. I suppose it *will* sell?"

The solicitor assured them that nowadays *anything* would sell.

"Very probably," he said, "someone will buy it for a Hotel or Guest House in which case they might like to buy it with the furniture complete. Fortunately the house is in very good repair. The late Miss Emory had extensive repairs and modernizations done just before the war and there has been very little deterioration. Oh yes, it's in good shape."

And it was then that Molly had had her idea.

"Giles," she said, "why shouldn't *we* run it as a Guest House ourselves?"

At first her husband had scoffed at the idea, but Molly had persisted.

"We needn't take very many people—not at first. It's an easy house to run—it's got hot and cold water in the bedrooms and central heating and a gas cooker. And we can have hens and ducks and our own eggs, and vegetables."

"Who'd do all the work—isn't it very hard to get servants?"

"Oh, *we'd* have to do the work. But wherever we lived we'd have to do that. A few extra people wouldn't really mean much more to do. We'd probably get a woman to come in after a bit when we got properly started. If we had only five people, each paying seven guineas a week—" Molly departed into the realms of somewhat optimistic mental arithmetic.

"And think, Giles," she ended. "It would be our *own* house. With our *own* things. As it is, it seems to me it will be years before we can ever find anywhere to live."

That, Giles admitted, was true. They had had so little time together since their hasty marriage, that they were both longing to settle down in a home.

So the great experiment was set under way. Advertisements were put in the local paper and in the Times, and various answers came.

And now, today, the first of the guests was to arrive. Giles had gone off early in the car to try and obtain some Army wire netting that had been

advertised as for sale on the other side of the county. Molly announced the necessity of walking to the village to make some last purchases.

The only thing that was wrong was the weather. For the last two days it had been bitterly cold and now the snow was beginning to fall. Molly hurried up the drive, thick feathery flakes falling on her waterproofed shoulders and bright curly hair. The weather forecasts had been lugubrious in the extreme. Heavy snowfall was to be expected.

She hoped anxiously that all the pipes wouldn't freeze. It would be too bad if everything went wrong just as they started. She glanced at her watch. Past teatime. Would Giles have got back yet? Would he be wondering where *she* was?

"I had to go to the village again for something I had forgotten," she would say. And he would laugh and say, "More tins?"

Tins were a joke between them. They were always on the look out for tins of food. The larder was really quite nicely stocked now in case of emergencies.

And, Molly thought, with a grimace, as she looked up at the sky, it looked as though emergencies were going to present themselves very soon.

The house was empty. Giles was not back yet. Molly went first into the kitchen, then upstairs, going round the newly prepared bedrooms. Mrs. Boyle in the south room with the mahogany and the fourposter. Major Metcalf in the blue room with the oak. Mr. Wren in the east room with the bay window. All the rooms looked very nice—and what a blessing that Aunt Katherine had had such a splendid stock of linen. Molly patted a counterpane into place and went downstairs again. It was nearly dark. The house felt suddenly very quiet and empty. It was a lonely house, two miles from a village, two miles, as Molly put it, from *anywhere*.

She had often been alone in the house before—but she had never before been so conscious of being alone in it. . . .

The snow beat in a soft flurry against the window panes. It made a whispery uneasy sound. Supposing Giles couldn't get back—supposing the snow was so thick that the car couldn't get through? Supposing she had to stay alone here—stay alone for days, perhaps.

She looked round the kitchen—a big comfortable kitchen that seemed to call for a big comfortable cook presiding at the kitchen table, her jaws moving rhythmically as she ate rock cakes and drank black tea—she should be flanked by a tall elderly parlour-maid on one side and a round rosy housemaid on the other, with a kitchenmaid at the other end of the table observing her betters with frightened eyes. And instead there was just herself, Molly Davis, playing a role that did not, yet, seem a very natural role to play. Her whole life, at the moment, seemed unreal—Giles seemed unreal. She was playing a part—just playing a part. . . .

A shadow passed the window and she jumped—a strange man was coming

through the snow. She heard the rattle of the side door. The stranger stood there in the open doorway, shaking off snow, a strange man, walking into the empty house.

And then, suddenly, illusion fled.

"Oh Giles," she cried, "I'm so glad you've come!"

2

"Hullo, sweetheart! What filthy weather! Lord, I'm *frozen*."

He stamped his feet and blew through his hands.

Automatically Molly picked up the coat that he had thrown in a Giles-like manner onto the oak chest. She put it on a hanger, taking out of the stuffed pockets a muffler, a newspaper, a ball of string and the morning's correspondence which he had shoved in pell mell. Moving into the kitchen, she laid down the articles on the dresser and put the kettle on the gas.

"Did you get the netting?" she asked. "What ages you've been."

"It wasn't the right kind. Wouldn't have been any good for us. I went on to another dump, but that wasn't any good, either. What have you been doing with yourself? Nobody turned up yet, I suppose?"

"Mrs. Boyle isn't coming till tomorrow, anyway."

"Major Metcalf and Mr. Wren ought to be here today."

"Major Metcalf sent a card to say he wouldn't be here till tomorrow."

"Then that leaves us and Mr. Wren for dinner. What do you think he's like? Correct sort of retired Civil Servant is my idea."

"No, I think he's an artist."

"In that case," said Giles, "we'd better get a week's rent in advance."

"Oh no, Giles, they bring luggage. If they don't pay we hang on to their luggage."

"And suppose their luggage is stones wrapped up in newspaper? The truth is, Molly, we don't in the least know what we're up against in this business. I hope they don't spot what beginners we are."

"Mrs. Boyle is sure to," said Molly. "She's that kind of woman."

"How do you know? You haven't seen her?"

Molly turned away. She spread a newspaper on the table, fetched some cheese and set to work to grate it.

"What's this?" inquired her husband.

"It's going to be Welsh Rarebit," Molly informed him. "Breadcrumbs and mashed potatoes and just a *teeny weeny* bit of cheese to justify its name."

"Aren't you a clever cook?" said her admiring husband.

"I wonder. I can do one thing at a time. It's *assembling* them that needs so much practice. Breakfast is the worst."

"Why?"

"Because it all happens at once—eggs and bacon and hot milk and coffee

and toast. The milk boils over, or the toast burns, or the bacon frizzles or the eggs go hard. You have to be as active as a scalded cat watching everything at once."

"I shall have to creep down unobserved tomorrow morning and watch this scalded cat impersonation."

"The kettle's boiling," said Molly. "Shall we take the tray into the library and hear the wireless? It's almost time for the news."

"As we seem to be going to spend almost the whole of our time in the kitchen, we ought to have a wireless there, too."

"Yes. How nice kitchens are. I love this kitchen. I think it's far and away the nicest room in the house. I like the dresser and the plates, and I simply love the lavish feeling that absolutely ENORMOUS kitchen range gives you—though of course I'm thankful I haven't got to cook on it."

"I suppose a whole year's fuel ration would go in one day?"

"Almost certainly, I should say. But think of the great joints that were roasted in it—sirloins of beef and saddles of mutton. Colossal copper preserving pans full of homemade strawberry jam with pounds and pounds of sugar going into it. What a lovely comfortable age the Victorian age was. Look at the furniture upstairs, large and solid and rather ornate—but oh! the heavenly comfort of it, with lots of room for the clothes one used to have, and every drawer sliding in and out so easily. Do you remember that smart modern flat we were lent? Everything built in and sliding—only nothing slid—it always stuck. And the doors pushed shut—only they never stayed shut, or if they did shut they wouldn't open."

"Yes, that's the worst of gadgets. If they don't go right, you're sunk."

"Well, come on, let's hear the news."

The news consisted mainly of grim warnings about the weather, the usual deadlock in foreign affairs, spirited bickerings in Parliament, and a murder in Culver Street, Paddington.

"Ugh," said Molly, switching it off. "Nothing but misery. I'm *not* going to hear appeals for fuel economy all over again. What do they expect you to do, sit and freeze? I don't think we ought to have tried to start a guest house in the winter. We ought to have waited until the spring." She added in a different tone of voice, "I wonder what the woman was like who was murdered."

"Mrs. Lyon?"

"Was that her name? I wonder who wanted to murder her and why. . . ."

"Perhaps she had a fortune under the floorboards."

"When it says the police are anxious to interview a man 'seen in the vicinity' does that mean he's the murderer?"

"I think it's usually that. Just a polite way of putting it."

The shrill note of a bell made them both jump.

"That's the front door," said Giles. "Enter—a murderer," he added facetiously.

"It would be, of course, in a play. Hurry up. It must be Mr. Wren. Now we shall see who's right about him, you or me."

3

Mr. Wren and a flurry of snow came in together with a rush. All that Molly, standing in the library door, could see of the newcomer was his silhouette against the white world outside.

How alike, thought Molly, were all men in their livery of civilization. Dark overcoat, grey hat, muffler round the neck.

In another moment Giles had shut the front door against the elements, Mr. Wren was unwinding his muffler and casting down his suitcase and flinging off his hat—all it seemed at the same time, and also talking. He had a high-pitched, almost querulous voice and stood revealed in the light of the hall as a young man with a shock of light sunburned hair and pale restless eyes.

"Too, too frightful," he was saying. "The English winter at its worst—a reversion to Dickens—Scrooge and Tiny Tim and all that. . . . One had to be so terribly hearty to stand up to it all. Don't you think so? And I've had a terrible cross country journey from Wales. Are you Mrs. Davis? But how delightful!" Molly's hand was seized in a quick bony clasp. "Not at all as I'd imagined you. I'd pictured you, you know, as an Indian Army General's widow. Terrifically grim and Mem Sahibish—and Benares *Whatnot*—a real Victorian *Whatnot*. Heavenly, simply heavenly. . . . Have you got any wax flowers? Or birds of Paradise? Oh, but I'm simply going to *love* this place. I was afraid, you know, it would be very Olde Worlds—very very Manor House—failing the Benares brass, I mean. Instead, it's marvellous—real Victorian Bedrock respectability. Tell me, have you got one of those beautiful sideboards—mahogany—purple plummy mahogany with great carved fruits?"

"As a matter of fact," said Molly, rather breathless under this torrent of words, "we have."

"No! Can I see it? At once. In here?"

His quickness was almost disconcerting. He had turned the handle of the dining room door, and clicked on the light. Molly followed him in, conscious of Giles' disapproving profile on her left.

Mr. Wren passed his long bony fingers over the rich carving of the massive sideboard with little cries of appreciation. Then he turned a reproachful glance upon his hostess.

"No big mahogany dining table? All these little tables dotted about instead?"

"We thought people would prefer it that way," said Molly.

"Darling, of course you're *quite* right. I was being carried away by my feeling for period. Of course if you had the table, you'd have to have the right family round it. Stern handsome father with a beard—prolific faded mother, eleven children, a grim governess and somebody called 'poor Harriet'—the poor relation who acts as general helper and is very very grateful for being given a good home. Look at that grate—think of the flames leaping up the chimney and blistering poor Harriet's back."

"I'll take your suitcase upstairs," said Giles. "East room?"

"Yes," said Molly.

Mr. Wren skipped out into the hall again as Giles went upstairs.

"Has it got a fourposter with little chintz roses?" he asked.

"No, it hasn't," said Giles and disappeared round the bend of the staircase.

"I don't believe your husband is going to like me," said Mr. Wren. "What's he been in? The Navy?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. They're much less tolerant than the Army and the Air Force. How long have you been married? Are you very much in love with him?"

"Perhaps you'd like to come up and see your room."

"Yes, of course that was impertinent. But I did really want to know. I mean, it's interesting, don't you think, to know all about people. What they feel and think, I mean, not just who they are and what they do."

"I suppose," said Molly in a demure voice, "you are Mr. Wren?"

The young man stopped short, clutched his hair in both hands and tugged at it.

"But how frightful—I never put first things first. Yes, I'm Christopher Wren—now don't laugh. My parents were a romantic couple. They hoped I'd be an architect. So they thought it a splendid idea to christen me Christopher—half way home, as it were."

"And are you an architect?" asked Molly, unable to help smiling.

"Yes, I am," said Mr. Wren triumphantly. "At least I'm nearly one. I'm not fully qualified yet. But it's really a remarkable example of wishful thinking coming off for once. Mind you, actually the name will be a handicap. I shall never be *the* Christopher Wren. However, Chris Wren's Pre Fab Nests may achieve fame."

Giles came down the stairs again and Molly said: "I'll show you your room now, Mr. Wren."

When she came down a few minutes later, Giles said,

"Well, did he like the pretty oak furniture?"

"He was very anxious to have a fourposter, so I gave him the Rose room instead."

Giles grunted and murmured something that ended "young twerp."

"Now look here, Giles," Molly assumed a severe demeanour. "This isn't a house-party of guests we're entertaining. This is business. Whether you like Christopher Wren or not—"

"I don't," Giles interjected.

"—has nothing whatever to do with it. He's paying seven guineas a week and that's all that matters."

"If he pays it, yes."

"He's agreed to pay it. We've got his letter."

"Did you transfer that suitcase of his to the Rose room?"

"He carried it, of course."

"Very gallant. But it wouldn't have strained you. There's certainly no question of stones wrapped up in newspaper. It's so light that there seems to me there's probably nothing in it."

"Ssh, here he comes," said Molly warningly.

Christopher Wren was conducted to the library which looked, Molly thought, very nice indeed, with its big chairs and its log fire. Dinner, she told him, would be in half an hour's time. In reply to a question, she explained that there were no other guests at the moment. . . . In that case, Christopher said, how would it be if he came into the kitchen and helped?

"I can cook you an omelette if you like," he said engagingly.

The subsequent proceedings took place in the kitchen and Christopher helped with the washing up.

Somehow, Molly felt, it was not quite the right start for a conventional Guest House—and Giles had not liked it at all. Oh well, thought Molly, as she fell asleep, tomorrow when the others came it would be different. . . .

CHAPTER II

THE MORNING came with dark skies and snow.

Giles looked grave and Molly's heart fell. The weather was going to make everything very difficult.

Mrs. Boyle arrived in the local taxi with chains on the wheels, and the driver brought pessimistic reports of the state of the road.

"Drifts afore nightfall," he prophesied.

Mrs. Boyle herself did not lighten the prevailing gloom. She was a large forbidding looking woman with a resonant voice and a masterful manner. Her natural aggressiveness had been heightened by a war career of persistent and militant usefulness.

"If I had not believed this was a *running* concern, I should never have come," she said. "I naturally thought it was a well established Guest House, properly run on scientific lines."

"There is no obligation for you to remain if you are not satisfied, Mrs. Boyle," said Giles.

"No, indeed, and I shall not think of doing so."

"Perhaps, Mrs. Boyle," said Giles, "you would like to ring up for a taxi. The roads are not yet blocked. If there has been any misapprehension it would perhaps be better if you went elsewhere." He added, "We have had so many applications for rooms that we shall be able to fill your place quite easily—indeed in future we are charging a higher rate for our rooms."

Mrs. Boyle threw him a sharp glance.

"I am certainly not going to leave before I have tried what the place is like. Perhaps you would let me have a rather large bath towel, Mrs. Davis. I am not accustomed to drying myself on a pocket handkerchief."

Giles grinned at Molly behind Mrs. Boyle's retreating back.

"Darling, you were wonderful," said Molly. "The way you stood up to her."

"Bullies soon climb down when they get their own medicine," said Giles.

"Oh dear," said Molly. "I wonder how she'll get on with Christopher Wren."

"She won't," said Giles.

And indeed, that very afternoon, Mrs. Boyle remarked to Molly,

"That's a very peculiar young man," with distinct disfavour in her voice.

The baker arrived looking like an Arctic explorer and delivered the bread with the warning that his next call, due in two days' time, might not materialize.

"Hold ups everywhere," he announced. "Got plenty of stores in, I hope?"

"Oh yes," said Molly. "We've got lots of tins. I'd better take extra flour, though."

She thought vaguely that there was something the Irish made called soda bread. If the worst came to the worst she could probably make that.

The baker had also brought the papers and she spread them out on the hall table.

Foreign affairs had receded in importance. The weather and the murder of Mrs. Lyon occupied the front page.

She was staring at the blurred reproduction of the dead woman's features when Christopher Wren's voice behind her said,

"Rather a *sordid* murder, don't you think? Such a *drab* looking woman and such a *drab* street. One can't feel, can one, that there is any story behind it?"

"I've no doubt," said Mrs. Boyle with a snort, "that the creature got no more than she deserved."

"Oh," Mr. Wren turned to her with engaging eagerness, "so you think it's definitely a *sex-crime*, do you?"

"I suggested nothing of the kind, Mr. Wren."

"But she *was* strangled, wasn't she? I wonder—" He held out his long white hands, "what it would feel like to strangle anyone."

"Really, Mr. Wren!"

Christopher moved nearer to her, lowering his voice.

"Have you considered, Mrs. Boyle, just what it would feel like to be strangled?"

Mrs. Boyle said again, even more indignantly: "Really, Mr. Wren!"

Molly read hurriedly out:

"The man the police are anxious to interview was wearing a dark overcoat and a light homburg hat, was a medium height and wore a woollen scarf."

"In fact," said Christopher Wren, "he looked just like everybody else."

He laughed.

"Yes," said Molly. "Just like everybody else. . . ."

2

In his room at Scotland Yard, Inspector Parminter said to Detective Sergeant Kane: "I'll see those two workmen now."

"Yes, sir."

"What are they like?"

"Decent class working men. Rather slow reactions. Dependable."

"Right." Inspector Parminter nodded.

Presently two embarrassed looking men in their best clothes were shown into his room. Parminter summed them up with a quick eye. He was an adept at setting people at their ease.

"So you think you've some information that might be useful to us on the Lyon case," he said. "Good of you to come along. Sit down. Smoke?"

He waited while they accepted cigarettes and lit up.

"Pretty awful weather outside."

"It is that, sir."

"Well, now then—let's have it."

The two men looked at each other, embarrassed now that it came to the difficulties of narration.

"Go ahead, Joe," said the bigger of the two.

Joe went ahead.

"It was like this, see, we 'adn't got a match."

"Where was this?"

"Jarman Street—we was working on the road there—gas mains."

Inspector Parminter nodded. Later he would get down to exact details of time and place. Jarman Street, he knew, was in the close vicinity of Culver Street where the tragedy had taken place.

"You hadn't got a match," he repeated encouragingly.

"No. Finished my box, I 'ad, and Bill's lighter wouldn't work and so I

spoke to a bloke as was passing. 'Can you give us a match, mister?' I says. Didn't think nothing particular, I didn't, not then. He was just passing—like lots of others—I just 'appened to ask 'im."

Again Parminter nodded.

"Well, he give us a match, 'e did. Didn't say nothing. 'Cruel cold,' Bill said to 'im, and he just answered, whispering-like, 'Yes, it is.' Got a cold on his chest, I thought. He was all wrapped up, anyway. 'Thanks, mister,' I says and gives him back his matches and he moves off quick, so quick that when I sees 'e'd dropped something, it's almost too late to call 'im back. It was a little notebook as he must 'ave pulled out of 'is pocket when he got the matches out. 'Hi, mister,' I calls after 'im, 'you've dropped something. But he didn't seem to hear—he just quickens up and bolts round the corner, didn't 'e, Bill?"

"That's right," agreed Bill. "Like a scurrying rabbit."

"Into the Harrow Road, that was, and it didn't seem as we'd catch up with him there, not the rate 'e was going, and anyway by then it was a bit late—it was only a little book, not a wallet or anything like that—maybe it wasn't important. 'Funny bloke,' I says. 'His hat pulled down over his eyes, and all buttoned up—like a crook on the pictures,' I says to Bill, didn't I, Bill?"

"That's what you said," agreed Bill.

"Funny I should have said that, not that I thought anything at the time. Just in a hurry to get home, that's what I thought, and I didn't blame 'im. Not arf cold, it was!"

"Not arf," agreed Bill.

"So I says to Bill: 'Let's 'ave a look at this little book and see if it's important.' Well, sir, I took a look. 'Only a couple of addresses,' I says to Bill. 74, Culver Street, and some blinking Manor 'ouse."

"Ritzy," said Bill with a snort of disapproval.

Joe continues his tale with a certain gusto now that he had got wound up.

"'74, Culver Street,' I says to Bill. 'That's just round the corner from 'ere. When we knock off, we'll take it round—and then I sees something written across the top of the page. 'What's this,' I says to Bill? And he takes it and reads it out. 'Three blind mice—must be off 'is nocker,' he says—and just at that very moment—yes, it was that very moment, sir, we 'ears some woman yelling 'Murder' a couple of streets away!"

Joe paused at this artistic climax.

"Didn't half yell, did she?" he resumed. "'Here,' I says to Bill, 'you nip along.' And by and by he comes back and says there's a big crowd and the police are there and some woman's had her throat cut or been strangled and that was the landlady who found her, yelling for the police. 'Where was it?"

I says to him. 'In Culver Street,' he says. 'What number?' I asks, and he says he didn't rightly notice."

Bill coughed and shuffled his feet with the sheepish air of one who has not done himself justice.

"So I says: 'We'll nip around and make sure,' and when we finds it's No. 74 we talk it over and 'Maybe,' Bill says, 'the address in the notebook's got nothing to do with it,' and I says as maybe it *has*, and anyway after we've talked it over and heard the police want to interview a man who left the 'ouse about that time, well, we come along 'ere and ask if we can see the gentleman who's handling the case, and I'm sure I 'ope as we aren't wasting your time."

"You acted very properly," said Parminter approvingly. "You've brought the notebook with you? Thank you. Now—"

His questions became brisk and professional. He got places, times, dates—the only thing he did not get was a description of the man who had dropped the notebook. Instead he got the same description as he had already got from a hysterical landlady, the description of a hat pulled down over the eyes, a buttoned up coat, a muffler swathed round the lower part of a face, a voice that was only a whisper, gloved hands. . . .

When the men had gone he remained staring down at the little book lying open on his table. Presently it would go to the appropriate department to see what evidence, if any, of fingerprints it might reveal. But now his attention was held by the two addresses and by the line of small handwriting along the top of the page.

He turned his head as Sergeant Kane came into the room.

"Come here, Kane, look at this."

Kane stood behind him and let out a low whistle as he read out,

"Three Blind Mice! Well, I'm dashed!"

"Yes." Parminter opened a drawer and took out a half sheet of notepaper which he laid beside the notebook on his desk. It had been found pinned carefully to the murdered woman.

On it was written:

This is the first. Below was a childish drawing of three mice and a bar of music.

Kane whistled the tune softly.

"Three Blind Mice . . . See how they run. . . ."

"That's it all right. That's the signature tune."

"Crazy, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes." Parminter frowned. "The identification of the woman is quite certain?"

"Yes, sir. Here's the report from the fingerprints department. Mrs. Lyon,

as she called herself, was really Maureen Gregg. She was released from Holloway two months ago on completion of her sentence."

Parminter said thoughtfully, "She went to 74, Culver Street calling herself Maureen Lyon. She occasionally drank a bit and she had been known to bring a man home with her once or twice. She displayed no fear of anything or anyone. There's no reason to believe she thought herself in any danger. This man rings the bell, asks for her, and is told by the landlady to go up to the second floor. She can't describe him, says only that he was of medium height and seemed to have a bad cold and lost his voice. She went back again to the basement and heard nothing of a suspicious nature. She did not hear the man go out. Ten minutes or so later she took up a cup of tea to her 'lodger' and discovered her strangled. . . .

"This wasn't a casual murder, Kane. It was carefully planned." He paused and then added abruptly, "I wonder how many houses there are in England called Monkswell Manor."

"There might be only one, sir."

"That would probably be too much luck. But get on with it. There's no time to lose."

The Sergeant's eye rested appreciatively on two entries in the notebook. 74, Culver Street, Monkswell Manor.

He said: "So you think—"

Parminter said swiftly,

"Yes. Don't you?"

"Could be. Monkswell Manor—now where—do you know, sir, I could swear I've seen that name quite lately."

"Where?"

"That's what I'm trying to remember . . . Wait a minute . . . Newspaper . . . Times. Back page. Wait a minute . . . Hotels and Boarding Houses . . . Half a sec, sir—it's an old one. I was doing the crossword."

He hurried out of the room and returned in triumph.

"Here you are, sir, look."

The Inspector followed the pointing finger.

"Monkswell Manor, Harpleden, Berks." He drew the telephone towards him.

"Get me the Berkshire County Police."

CHAPTER III

WITH THE ARRIVAL of Major Metcalf, Monkswell Manor settled into its routine as a going concern. Major Metcalf was neither formidable like Mrs. Boyle, nor erratic like Christopher Wren. He was a stolid middle-aged man of spruce

military appearance who had done most of his service in India. He appeared satisfied with his room and its furniture, and while he and Mrs. Boyle did not actually find mutual friends, he had known cousins of friends of hers—"the Yorkshire branch," out in Poonah. His luggage, however, two heavy pig-skin cases, satisfied even Giles' suspicious nature.

Truth to tell, Molly and Giles did not have much time for speculating about their guests. Between them, dinner was cooked, served, eaten and washed up satisfactorily. Major Metcalf praised the coffee and Giles and Molly retired to bed tired, but triumphant—to be roused about two in the morning by the persistent ringing of a bell.

"Damn," said Giles. "It's the front door. What on earth—"

"Hurry up," said Molly. "Go and see."

Casting a reproachful glance at her, Giles wrapped his dressing gown round him and descended the stairs. Molly heard the bolts being drawn back and a murmur of voices in the hall. Presently, driven by curiosity, she crept out of bed and went to peep from the top of the stairs. In the hall below, Giles was assisting a bearded stranger out of a snow covered overcoat. Fragments of conversation floated up to her.

"Brrr," it was an explosive foreign sound. "My fingers are so cold I cannot feel them. And my feet—" A stamping sound was heard.

"Come in here." Giles threw open the library door. "It's warm. You'd better wait here while I get a room ready."

"I am indeed fortunate," said the stranger politely.

Molly peered inquisitively through the banisters. She saw an elderly man with a small black beard and Mephistophelean eyebrows. A man who moved with a young and jaunty step in spite of the grey at his temples.

Giles shut the library door on him and came quickly up the stairs. Molly rose from her crouching position.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

Giles grinned. "Another guest for the Guest House. Car overturned in a snowdrift. He got himself out and was making his way as best he could (it's a howling blizzard still, listen to it) along the road when he saw our board. He said it was like an answer to prayer."

"You think he's—all right?"

"Darling, this isn't the sort of night for a housebreaker to be doing his rounds."

"He's a foreigner, isn't he?"

"Yes. His name's Paravicini. I saw his wallet—I rather think he showed it on purpose—simply crammed with notes. Which room shall we give him?"

"The Green room. It's all tidy and ready. We'll just have to make up the bed."

"I suppose I'll have to lend him pyjamas. All his things are in the car. He said he had to climb out through the window."

Molly fetched sheets, pillow cases and towels. As they hurriedly made the bed up, Giles said:

"It's coming down thick. We're going to be snowed up, Molly, completely cut off. Rather exciting in a way, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Molly doubtfully. "Do you think I can make soda bread, Giles?"

"Of course you can. You can make anything," said her loyal husband.

"I've never tried to make bread. It's the sort of thing one takes for granted. It may be new or it may be stale but it's just something the baker brings. But if we're snowed up there won't be a baker."

"Nor a butcher, nor a postman. No newspapers. And probably no telephone."

"Just the wireless telling us what to do?"

"At any rate we make our own electric light."

"You must run the engine again tomorrow. And we must keep the central heating well stoked."

"I suppose our next lot of coke won't come in now. We're very low."

"Oh bother. Giles, I feel we are in for a simply frightful time. Hurry up and get Para—whatever his name is. I'll go back to bed."

Morning brought confirmation of Giles' forebodings. Snow was piled five feet high, drifting up against the doors and windows. Outside it was still snowing. The world was white, silent and in some subtle way—menacing. . . .

2

Mrs. Boyle sat at breakfast. There was no one else in the dining room. At the adjoining table, Major Metcalf's place had been cleared away. Mr. Wren's table was still laid for breakfast. One early riser, presumably, and one late one. Mrs. Boyle herself knew definitely that there was only one proper time for breakfast, nine o'clock.

Mrs. Boyle had finished her excellent omelette and was champing toast between her strong white teeth. She was in a grudging and undecided mood. Monkswell Manor was not at all what she had imagined it would be. She had hoped for Bridge, for faded spinsters whom she could impress with her social position and connections, and to whom she could hint at the importance and secrecy of her war service.

The end of the war had left Mrs. Boyle marooned, as it were, on a desert shore. She had always been a busy woman, talking fluently of efficiency and organization. Her vigour and drive had prevented people asking whether she was indeed a good or efficient organizer. War activities had suited her down

to the ground. She had bossed people and bullied people and worried heads of departments and, to give her her due, had at no time spared herself. Subservient women had run to and fro, terrified of her slightest frown. And now all that exciting hustling life was over. She was back in private life and her former private life had vanished. Her house which had been requisitioned by the Army, needed thorough repairing and redecorating before she could return to it and the difficulties of domestic help made a return to it impracticable in any case. Her friends were largely scattered and dispersed. Presently, no doubt, she would find her niche, but at the moment it was a case of marking time. A Hotel or a Boarding House seemed the answer. And she had chosen to come to Monkswell Manor.

She looked round her disparagingly.

"Most dishonest," she said to herself, "not to have told me they were only just starting."

She pushed her plate further away from her. The fact that her breakfast had been excellently cooked and served, with good coffee and homemade marmalade, in a curious way annoyed her still more. It had deprived her of a legitimate cause of complaint. Her bed, too, had been comfortable, with embroidered sheets and a soft pillow. Mrs. Boyle liked comfort, but she also liked to find fault. The latter was, perhaps, the stronger passion of the two.

Rising majestically, Mrs. Boyle left the dining room, passing in the doorway that very extraordinary young man with the red hair. He was wearing this morning a checked tie of virulent green—a woollen tie.

"Preposterous," said Mrs. Boyle to herself. "Quite preposterous."

The way he looked at her, too, sideways out of those pale eyes of his—she didn't like it. There was something upsetting—unusual—about that faintly mocking glance.

"Unbalanced mentally, I shouldn't wonder," said Mrs. Boyle to herself.

She acknowledged his flamboyant bow with a slight inclination of her head and marched into the big drawing room. Comfortable chairs here, particularly the large rose coloured one. She had better make it clear that that was to be *her* chair. She deposited her knitting on it as a precaution and walked over and laid a hand on the radiators. As she had suspected, they were only warm, not hot. Mrs. Boyle's eye gleamed militantly. She could have something to say about *that*.

She glanced out of the window.

Dreadful weather—quite dreadful. Well, she wouldn't stay here long—not unless more people came and made the place amusing.

Some snow slid off the roof with a soft whooshing sound. Mrs. Boyle jumped.

"No," she said out loud. "I shan't stay here long."

Somebody laughed—a faint high chuckle. She turned her head sharply.

Young Wren was standing in the doorway looking at her with that curious expression of his.

"No," he said. "I don't suppose you will."

3

Major Metcalf was helping Giles to shovel away snow from the back door. He was a good worker and Giles was quite vociferous in his expressions of gratitude.

"Good exercise," said Major Metcalf. "Must get exercise every day. Got to keep fit, you know."

So the Major was an exercise fiend. Giles had feared as much. It went with his demand for breakfast at half past seven.

As though reading Giles' thoughts, the Major said:

"Very good of your Missus to cook me an early breakfast. Nice to get a new laid egg, too."

Giles had risen himself before seven, owing to the exigencies of Hotel keeping. He and Molly had had boiled eggs and tea and had set to on the sitting rooms. Everything was spick and span. Giles could not help thinking that if he had been a guest in his own establishment, nothing would have dragged him out of bed on a morning such as this until the last possible moment.

The Major, however, had been up and breakfasted, and roamed about the house, apparently full of energy seeking an outlet.

"Well," thought Giles, "there's plenty of snow to shovel."

He threw a sideways glance at his companion. Not an easy man to place, really. Hard bitten, well over middle age, something queerly watchful about the eyes. A man who was giving nothing away. Giles wondered why he had come to Monkswell Manor. Demobilized, probably, and no job to go to. . . .

4

Mr. Paravicini came down late. He had coffee and a piece of toast—a frugal Continental breakfast.

He somewhat disconcerted Molly when she brought it to him by rising to his feet, bowing in an exaggerated manner and exclaiming:

"My charming hostess? I am right, am I not?"

Molly admitted rather shortly that he was right. She was in no mood for compliments at this hour.

"And why," she said, as she piled crockery recklessly in the sink, "everybody has to have their breakfast at a different time—it's a bit hard."

She slung the plates into the rack, and hurried upstairs to deal with the beds. She could expect no assistance from Giles this morning. He had to clear a way to the boiler house and to the hen house.

Molly did the beds at top speed and admittedly in the most slovenly manner, smoothing sheets and pulling them up as fast as she could.

She was at work on the baths when the telephone rang.

Molly first cursed at being interrupted, then felt a slight feeling of relief that the telephone at least was still in action as she ran down to answer it.

She arrived in the library a little breathless and lifted the receiver.

"Yes?"

A hearty voice with a slight but pleasant country burr asked,

"Is that Monkswell Manor?"

"Monkswell Manor Guest House."

"Can I speak to Commander Davis, please?"

"I'm afraid he can't come to the telephone just now," said Molly. "This is Mrs. Davis. Who is speaking, please?"

"Superintendent Hogben, Berkshire Police."

Molly gave a slight gasp. She said:

"Oh yes—er—yes?"

"Mrs. Davis, rather an urgent matter has arisen. I don't wish to say very much over the telephone, but I have sent Detective Sergeant Trotter out to you and he should be there any minute now."

"But he won't get here. We're snowed up—completely snowed up. The roads are impassable."

There was no break in the confidence of the voice at the other end.

"Trotter will get to you all right," it said. "And please impress upon your husband, Mrs. Davis, to listen very carefully to what Trotter has to tell you, and to follow his instructions implicitly. That's all."

"But, Superintendent Hogben, what—"

But there was a decisive click. Hogben had clearly said all he had to say and rung off. Molly waggled the telephone rest once or twice, then gave up. She turned as the door opened:

"Oh, Giles darling, there you are."

Giles had snow on his hair and a good deal of coal grime on his face. He looked hot.

"What is it, sweetheart? I've filled the coal scuttles and brought in the wood. I'll do the hens next and then have a look at the boiler. Is that right? What's the matter, Molly? You looked scared."

"Giles, it was the *Police*."

"The Police?" Giles sounded incredulous.

"Yes, they're sending out an Inspector or a Sergeant or something."

"But why? What have we done?"

"I don't know. Do you think it could be that two pounds of butter we had from Ireland?"

Giles was frowning.

"I did remember to get the wireless license, didn't I?"

"Yes, it's in the desk. Giles, old Mrs. Bidlock gave me five of her coupons for that old tweed coat of mine. I suppose that's wrong—but I think it's perfectly fair. I'm a coat less so why shouldn't I have the coupons? Oh dear, what else is there we've done?"

"I had a near shave with the car the other day. . . . But it was definitely the other fellow's fault. Definitely."

"We must have done *something*," wailed Molly.

"The trouble is that practically everything one does nowadays is illegal," said Giles gloomily. "That's why one has a permanent feeling of guilt. Actually I expect it's something to do with running this place. Running a Guest House is probably chock full of snags we've never heard of."

"I thought drink was the only thing that mattered. We haven't given anyone anything to drink. Otherwise, why shouldn't we run our own house any way we please?"

"I know. It sounds all right. But as I say, everything's more or less forbidden nowadays."

"Oh dear," sighed Molly. "I wish we'd never started. We're going to be snowed up for days, and everybody will be cross and they'll eat all our reserves of tins—"

"Cheer up, sweetheart," said Giles. "We're having a bad break at the moment, but it will pan out all right."

He kissed the top of her head rather absentmindedly, and, releasing her, said in a different voice:

"You know, Molly, come to think of it, it must be something pretty serious to send a police sergeant trekking out here in all this."

He waved a hand towards the snow outside. He said:

"It must be something really *urgent*—"

As they stared at each other, the door opened and Mrs. Boyle came in.

"Ah, here you are, Mr. Davis," said Mrs. Boyle. "Do you know the central heating in the drawing room is practically stone cold?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Boyle. We're rather short of coke and—"

Mrs. Boyle cut in ruthlessly.

"I am paying seven guineas a week here—*seven* guineas. And I do *not* expect to freeze."

Giles flushed. He said shortly:

"I'll go and stoke it up."

He went out of the room and Mrs. Boyle turned to Molly.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mrs. Davis, that is a very extraordinary young man you have staying here. His manners—and his ties—and does he never brush his hair?"

"He's an extremely brilliant young architect," said Molly.

"I beg your pardon."

"Christopher Wren is an architect and—"

"My dear young woman," snapped Mrs. Boyle, "I have naturally heard of Sir Christopher Wren. Of course he was an architect. He built St. Paul's. You young people seem to think that education came in with the Education Act."

"I meant this Wren. His name is Christopher. His parents called him that because they hoped he'd be an architect. And he is—or nearly—one, so it turned out all right."

"Humph," Mrs. Boyle snorted. "It sounds a very fishy story to me. I should make some inquiries about him if I were you. What do you know about him?"

"Just as much as I know about you, Mrs. Boyle—which is, that both you and he are paying us seven guineas a week. That's really all that I need to know, isn't it? And all that concerns me. It doesn't matter to me whether I like my guests, or whether," Molly looked very steadily at Mrs. Boyle, "—or whether I don't."

Mrs. Boyle flushed angrily.

"You are young and inexperienced and should welcome advice from someone more knowledgeable than yourself. And what about this queer foreigner? When did *he* arrive?"

"In the middle of the night."

"Indeed. Most peculiar. Not a very conventional hour."

"To turn away bona fide travellers would be against the law, Mrs. Boyle." Molly added sweetly: "You may not be aware of that."

"All I can say is that this Paravicini, or whatever he calls himself, seems to me—"

"Beware, beware, dear lady. You talk of the devil and then—"

Mrs. Boyle jumped as though it had been indeed the devil who addressed her. Mr. Paravicini, who had minced quietly in without either of the two women noticing him, laughed and rubbed his hands together with a kind of elderly Satanic glee.

"You startled me," said Mrs. Boyle. "I did not hear you come in."

"I come in on tiptoe, so," said Mr. Paravicini. "Nobody ever hears me come and go. That I find very amusing. Sometimes I overhear things. That, too, amuses me." He added softly, "But I do not forget what I hear."

Mrs. Boyle said rather feebly, "Indeed? I must get my knitting—I left it in the drawing room."

She went out hurriedly. Molly stood looking at Mr. Paravicini with a puzzled expression.

He approached her with a kind of hop and skip.

"My charming hostess looks upset." Before she could prevent it, he picked up her hand and kissed it. "What is it, dear lady?"

Molly drew back a step. She was not sure that she liked Mr. Paravicini much. He was leering at her like an elderly satyr.

"Everything is rather difficult this morning," she said lightly. "Because of the snow."

"Yes." Mr. Paravicini turned his head round to look out of the window. "Snow makes everything very difficult, does it not? Or else, it makes things very easy."

"I don't know what you mean."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "There is quite a lot that you do not know. I think, for one thing, that you do not know very much about running a Guest House."

Molly's chin went up belligerently.

"I daresay we don't. . . . But we mean to make a go of it."

"Bravo, bravo."

"After all," Molly's voice betrayed slight anxiety, "I'm not such a very bad cook. . . ."

"You are without doubt an enchanting cook," said Mr. Paravicini.

What a nuisance foreigners were, thought Molly.

Perhaps Mr. Paravicini read her thoughts. At all events his manner changed. He spoke quietly and quite seriously.

"May I give you a little word of warning, Mrs. Davis? You and your husband must not be too trusting, you know. Have you references with these 'guests' of yours?"

"Is that usual?" Molly looked troubled. "I thought people just—just came."

"It is advisable always to know a little about the people who sleep under your roof." He leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder in a minatory kind of way. "Take myself, for example. I turn up in the middle of the night. My car, I say, is overturned in a snowdrift. What do you know of me? Nothing at all. Perhaps you know nothing, either, of your other guests."

"Mrs. Boyle," began Molly—but stopped as that lady herself re-entered the room, knitting in hand.

"The drawing room is too cold. I shall sit in here." She marched towards the fireplace.

Mr. Paravicini pirouetted swiftly ahead of her.

"Allow me to poke the fire for you."

Molly was struck, as she had been the night before, by the youthful jauntiness of his step. She had noticed that he always seemed careful to keep his back to the light, and now, as he knelt, poking the fire, she thought she saw the reason for it. Mr. Paravicini's face was cleverly but decidedly "made up."

So the old idiot tried to make himself look younger than he was, did he?

Well, he didn't succeed. He looked all his age and more. Only the youthful walk was incongruous. Perhaps that, too, had been carefully counterfeited?

She was brought back from speculation to the disagreeable realities by the brisk entrance of Major Metcalf.

"Mrs. Davis. I'm afraid the pipes of the—er—" he lowered his voice modestly, "downstairs cloakroom are frozen."

"Oh dear," groaned Molly. "What an awful day. First the police and then the pipes."

Mr. Paravicini dropped the poker into the grate with a clatter. Mrs. Boyle stopped knitting. Molly, looking at Major Metcalf, was puzzled by his sudden stiff immobility and by the indescribable expression on his face. It was an expression she could not place. It was as though all emotion had been drained out of it, leaving something carved out of wood behind.

He said in a short staccato voice:

"Police, did you say?"

She was conscious that behind the stiff immobility of his demeanour, some violent emotion was at work. It might have been fear, or alertness, or excitement—but there was *something*. This man, she said to herself, could be *dangerous*.

He said again, and this time his voice was just mildly curious:

"What's that about the police?"

"They rang up," said Molly. "Just now. To say they're sending a Sergeant out here." She looked towards the window. "But I shouldn't think he'll ever get here," she said hopefully.

"Why are they sending the police here?" He took a step nearer to her, but before she could reply, the door opened and Giles came in.

"This ruddy coke's more than half stones," he said angrily.

Then he added sharply:

"Is anything the matter?"

Major Metcalf turned to him.

"I hear the police are coming out here," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Giles. "No one can ever get through in this. Why, the drifts are five feet deep. The road's all banked up. Nobody will get here today."

And at that moment there came distinctly three loud taps on the window.

CHAPTER IV

IT STARTLED them all. For a moment or two they did not locate the sound. It came with the emphasis and menace of a ghostly warning. And then, with a cry, Molly pointed to the French window. A man was standing there tap-

ping on the pane and the mystery of his arrival was explained by the fact that he wore skis.

With an exclamation, Giles crossed the room, fumbled with the catch, and threw open the French window.

"Thank you, sir," said the new arrival. He had a slightly common cheerful voice and a well bronzed face.

"Detective Sergeant Trotter," he announced himself.

Mrs. Boyle peered at him over her knitting with disfavour.

"You can't be a Sergeant," she said disapprovingly. "You're too young."

The young man, who was indeed very young, looked affronted at this criticism and said in a slightly annoyed tone:

"I'm not quite as young as I look, Madam."

His eye roved over the group and picked out Giles.

"Are you Mr. Davis? Can I get these skis off and stow them somewhere?"

"Of course, come with me."

Mrs. Boyle said acidly as the door to the hall closed behind them:

"I suppose that's what we pay our police force for, nowadays, to go round enjoying themselves at winter sports."

Paravicini had come close to Molly. There was quite a hiss in his voice as he said in a quick low tone:

"Why did you send for the police, Mrs. Davis?"

She recoiled a little before the steady malignity of his glance. This was a new Mr. Paravicini. For a moment she felt afraid. She said helplessly:

"But I didn't. I didn't."

And then Christopher Wren came excitedly through the door, saying in a high penetrating whisper:

"Who's that man in the hall? Where did he come from? So terribly hearty and all over snow."

Mrs. Boyle's voice boomed out over the click of her knitting needles.

"You may believe it or not, but that man is a policeman. A policeman—skiing!"

The final disruption of the lower classes had come, so her manner seemed to say.

Major Metcalf murmured to Molly:

"Excuse me, Mrs. Davis, but may I use your telephone?"

"Of course, Major Metcalf."

He went over to the instrument, just as Christopher Wren said shrilly:

"He's very handsome, don't you think so? I always think policemen are terribly attractive."

"Hullo, hullo—" Major Metcalf was rattling the telephone irritably. He turned to Molly.

"Mrs. Davis, this telephone is dead, quite dead."

"It was all right just now. I—"

She was interrupted. Christopher Wren was laughing, a high shrill, almost hysterical laugh.

"So we're quite cut off now. Quite cut off. That's funny, isn't it?"

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Major Metcalf stiffly.

"No, indeed," said Mrs. Boyle.

Christopher was still in fits of laughter.

"It's a private joke of my own," he said. "Hsh," he put his finger to his lips, "the sleuth is coming."

Giles came in with Sergeant Trotter. The latter had got rid of his skis and brushed off the snow and was holding in his hand a large notebook and pencil. He brought an atmosphere of unhurried judicial procedure with him.

"Molly," said Giles, "Sergeant Trotter wants a word with us alone."

Molly followed them both out of the room.

"We'll go in the study," Giles said.

They went into the small room at the back of the hall which was dignified by that name. Sergeant Trotter closed the door carefully behind him.

"What have we done?" Molly demanded plaintively.

"Done?" Sergeant Trotter stared at her. Then he smiled broadly.

"Oh," he said. "It's nothing of that kind, Madam. I'm sorry if there's been a misapprehension of any kind. No, Mrs. Davis, it's something quite different. It's more a matter of police protection, if you understand me."

Not understanding him in the least, they both looked at him enquiringly.

Sergeant Trotter went on fluently:

"It relates to the death of Mrs. Lyon, Mrs. Maureen Lyon, who was murdered in London two days ago. You may have read about the case."

"Yes," said Molly.

"The first thing I want to know is if you were acquainted with this Mrs. Lyon?"

"Never heard of her," said Giles, and Molly murmured concurrence.

"Well, that's rather what we expected. But as a matter of fact Lyon wasn't the murdered woman's real name. She had a police record and her fingerprints were on file, so we were able to identify her without any difficulty. Her real name was Gregg; Maureen Gregg. Her late husband, John Gregg, was a farmer who resided at Longridge Farm not very far from here. You may have heard of the Longridge Farm case."

The room was very still. Only one sound broke the stillness, a soft unexpected plop as snow slithered off the roof and fell to the ground outside. It was a secret, almost sinister sound.

Trotter went on:

"Three evacuee children were billeted on the Greggs at Longridge Farm in 1940. One of those children subsequently died as the result of criminal

neglect and ill treatment. The case made quite a sensation, and the Greggs were both sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Gregg escaped on his way to prison, he stole a car and had a crash while trying to evade the police. He was killed outright. Mrs. Gregg served her sentence and was released two months ago."

"And now she's been murdered," said Giles. "Who do they think did it?"

But Sergeant Trotter was not to be hurried.

"You remember the case, sir?" he asked.

Giles shook his head.

"In 1940 I was a midshipman serving in the Mediterranean."

Trotter transferred his glance to Molly.

"I—I do remember hearing about it, I think," said Molly rather breathlessly. "But why do you come to us? What have we to do with it?"

"It's a question of your being in danger, Mrs. Davis!"

"Danger?" Giles spoke incredulously.

"It's like this, sir. A notebook was picked up near the scene of the crime. In it were written two addresses. The first was 74, Culver Street."

"Where the woman was murdered?" Molly put in.

"Yes, Mrs. Davis. The other address was Monkswell Manor."

"What?" Molly's tone was incredulous. "But how extraordinary."

"Yes. That's why Superintendent Hogben thought it imperative to find out if you knew of any connection between you, or between this house, and the Longridge Farm case."

"There's nothing—absolutely nothing," said Giles. "It must be some coincidence."

Sergeant Trotter said gently, "Superintendent Hogben doesn't think it is a coincidence. He'd have come himself if it had been at all possible. Under the weather conditions, and as I'm an expert skier, he sent me with instructions to get full particulars of everyone in this house, to report back to him by phone, and to take all measures I thought expedient for the safety of the household."

Giles said sharply: "Safety? Good Lord, man, you don't think somebody is going to be killed *here*?"

Trotter said apologetically:

"I didn't want to upset the lady, but yes, that is just what Superintendent Hogben does think."

"But what earthly reason could there be—"

Giles broke off and Trotter said:

"That's just what I'm here to find out."

"But the whole thing's *crazy*."

"Yes, sir. But it's because it's crazy that it's dangerous."

Molly said:

"There's something more you haven't told us yet, isn't there, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Madam. At the top of the page in the notebook was written 'Three Blind Mice.' Pinned to the dead woman's body was a paper with '*This is the first*' written on it. And below it a drawing of *three mice* and a bar of music. The music was the tune of the nursery rhyme 'Three Blind Mice.'"

Molly sang softly:

"Three Blind Mice,
See how they run.
They all ran after the Farmer's wife!
She—"

She broke off.

"Oh, it's horrible—*horrible*. There were three children, weren't there?"

"Yes, Mrs. Davis. A boy of fifteen. A girl of fourteen and the boy of twelve who died—"

"What happened to the others?"

"The girl was, I believe, adopted by someone. We haven't been able to trace her. The boy would be just on twenty-three now. We've lost track of him. He was said to have always been a bit—queer. He joined up in the Army at eighteen. Later, he deserted. Since then, he's disappeared. The Army psychiatrist says definitely that he's not normal."

"You think that it was he who killed Mrs. Lyon?" Giles asked. "And that he's a homicidal maniac and may turn up here for some unknown reason?"

"We think that there must be a connection between someone here and the Longridge Farm business. Once we can establish what that connection is, we will be forearmed. Now you state, sir, that you yourself have no connection with that case. The same goes for you, Mrs. Davis?"

"I—oh yes—yes. . . ."

"Perhaps you will tell me exactly who else there is in the house?"

They gave him the names. Mrs. Boyle. Major Metcalf. Mr. Christopher Wren. Mr. Paravicini. He wrote them down in his notebook.

"Servants?"

"We haven't any servants," said Molly. "And that reminds me, I must go and put the potatoes on."

She left the study abruptly.

Trotter turned to Giles.

"What do you know about these people, sir?"

"I—we—" Giles paused. Then he said quietly, "Really, we don't know anything about them, Sergeant Trotter. Mrs. Boyle wrote from a Bournemouth Hotel. Major Metcalf from Leamington, Mr. Wren from a private hotel in South Kensington. Mr. Paravicini just turned up out of the blue—or rather

out of the white—his car overturned in a snowdrift near here. Still, I suppose they'll have identity cards, ration books, that sort of thing?"

"I shall go into all that, of course."

"In a way it's lucky that the weather is so awful," said Giles. "The murderer can't very well turn up in this, can he?"

"Perhaps he doesn't need to, Mr. Davis."

"What do you mean?"

Sergeant Trotter hesitated for a moment and then he said:

"You've got to consider, sir, that *he may be here already.*"

Giles stared at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Gregg was killed two days ago. *All your visitors here have arrived since then, Mr. Davis.*"

"Yes, but they'd booked beforehand—some time beforehand—except for Paravicini."

Sergeant Trotter sighed. His voice sounded tired.

"These crimes were planned in advance."

"Crimes? But only one crime has happened yet. Why are you sure that there will be another?"

"That it will happen—no. I hope to prevent that. That it will be attempted, yes."

"But then—if you're right," Giles spoke excitedly, "there's only one person it could be. There's only one person who's the right age. *Christopher Wren!*"

2

Sergeant Trotter had joined Molly in the kitchen.

"I'd be glad, Mrs. Davis, if you would come with me to the library. I want to make a general statement to everyone—Mr. Davis has kindly gone to prepare the way—"

"All right—just let me finish these potatoes— Sometimes I wish Sir Walter Raleigh had never discovered the beastly things—"

Sergeant Trotter preserved a disapproving silence. Molly said apologetically—

"I can't really believe it, you see— It's so fantastic—"

"It isn't fantastic, Mrs. Davis— It's just plain *facts.*"

"You have a description of the man?" Molly asked curiously.

"Medium height, slight build, wore a dark overcoat and a light hat, spoke in a whisper, his face was hidden by a muffler. You see—that might be anybody." He paused and added: "There are three dark overcoats and light hats hanging up in your hall here, Mrs. Davis."

"I don't think any of these people came from London."

"Didn't they, Mrs. Davis?" With a swift movement Sergeant Trotter moved to the dresser and picked up a newspaper.

"The *Evening Standard* of February 19th. Two days ago. *Someone* brought that paper here, Mrs. Davis."

"But how extraordinary." Molly stared, some faint chord of memory stirred. "Where can that paper have come from?"

"You mustn't take people always at their face value, Mrs. Davis. You don't really know anything about these people you have admitted to your house." He added, "I take it you and Mr. Davis are new to the Guest House business?"

"Yes, we are," Molly admitted. She felt suddenly young, foolish and childish.

"You haven't been married long, perhaps, either?"

"Just a year." She blushed slightly. "It was all rather sudden."

"Love at first sight," said Sergeant Trotter sympathetically.

Molly felt quite unable to snub him.

"Yes," she said, and added in a burst of confidence, "we'd only known each other a fortnight. . . ."

Her thoughts went back over those fourteen days of whirlwind courtship. There hadn't been any doubts—they had both known. In a worrying, nerve-racked world, they had found the miracle of each other. . . . A little smile came to her lips.

She came back to the present to find Sergeant Trotter eyeing her indulgently.

"Your husband doesn't come from these parts, does he?"

"No," said Molly vaguely. "He comes from Lincolnshire."

She knew very little of Giles' childhood and upbringing. His parents were dead and he always avoided talking about his early days. He had had, she fancied, an unhappy childhood.

"You're both very young, if I may say so, to run a place of this kind," said Sergeant Trotter.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm twenty-two and—"

She broke off as the door opened and Giles came in.

"Everything's all set. I've given them a rough outline," he said. "I hope that's all right, Sergeant?"

"Saves time," said Trotter. "Are you ready, Mrs. Davis?"

3

Four voices spoke at once as Sergeant Trotter entered the library.

Highest and shrillest was that of Christopher Wren declaring that this was too, too thrilling and he wasn't going to sleep a wink tonight, and please, *please* could we have all the gory details?

A kind of double bass accompaniment came from Mrs. Boyle. "Absolute outrage—sheer incompetence—police have no business to let murderers go roaming about the countryside."

Mr. Paravicini was eloquent chiefly with his hands. His gesticulations were more eloquent than his words which were drowned by Mrs. Boyle's double bass. Major Metcalf could be heard in an occasional short staccato bark. He was asking for "facts."

Trotter waited a moment or two, then he held up an authoritative hand and, rather surprisingly, there was silence.

"Thank you," he said. "Now, Mr. Davis has given you an outline of why I'm here. I want to know one thing, and one thing only, and I want to know it quick. *Which of you has some connection with the Longridge Farm case?*"

The silence was unbroken. Four blank faces looked at Sergeant Trotter. The emotions of a few moments back, excitement, indignation, hysteria, enquiry, were wiped away as a sponge wipes out the chalk marks on a slate.

Sergeant Trotter spoke again, more urgently.

"Please understand me. One of you, we have reason to believe, is in danger—deadly danger. *I have got to know which one of you it is!*"

And still no one spoke or moved.

Something like anger came into Trotter's voice.

"Very well—I'll ask you one by one. Mr. Paravicini?"

A very faint smile flickered across Mr. Paravicini's face. He raised his hands in a protesting foreign gesture.

"But I am a stranger in these parts, Inspector. I know nothing, but nothing, of these local affairs of bygone years."

Trotter wasted no time. He snapped out:

"Mrs. Boyle?"

"Really I don't see why—I mean—why should I have anything to do with such a distressing business?"

"Mr. Wren?"

Christopher said shrilly:

"I was a mere child at the time. I don't remember even *hearing* about it."

"Major Metcalf?"

The Major said abruptly:

"Read about it in the papers. I was stationed at Edinburgh at the time."

"That's all you have to say—any of you?"

Silence again. Trotter gave an exasperated sigh.

"If one of you gets murdered," he said, "you'll only have yourself to blame."

He turned abruptly and went out of the room.

CHAPTER V

"MY DEARS," said Christopher. "How *melodramatic!*"

He added, "He's very handsome, isn't he? I do admire the police. So stern and hard boiled. Quite a thrill, this whole business. *Three Blind Mice*. How does the tune go?"

He whistled the air softly, and Molly cried out involuntarily, "Don't!" He whirled round on her and laughed.

"But, darling," he said, "it's my *signature* tune. I've never been taken for a murderer before and I'm getting a tremendous kick out of it!"

"Melodramatic rubbish," said Mrs. Boyle. "I don't believe a word of it." Christopher's light eyes danced with an impish mischief.

"But just wait, Mrs. Boyle." He lowered his voice, "Till I creep up behind you and you feel my hands round your throat. . . ."

Molly flinched. Giles said angrily:

"You're upsetting my wife, Wren. It's a damned poor joke, anyway."

"It's no joking matter," said Metcalf.

"Oh, but it is," said Christopher. "That's just what it is—a madman's joke. That's what makes it so deliciously *macabre*."

He looked round at them and laughed again.

"If you could just see your faces," he said.

Then he went swiftly out of the room.

2

Mrs. Boyle recovered first.

"A singularly ill-mannered and neurotic young man," she said. "Probably a conscientious objector."

"He tells me he was buried during an air raid for forty-eight hours before being dug out," said Major Metcalf. "That accounts for a good deal, I daresay."

"People have so many excuses for giving way to nerves," said Mrs. Boyle acidly. "I'm sure I went through as much as anybody in the war, and my nerves are all right."

"Perhaps that's just as well for you, Mrs. Boyle," said Metcalf.

"What do you mean?"

Major Metcalf said quietly:

"I think you were actually the billeting officer for this district in 1940, Mrs. Boyle." He looked at Molly who gave a grave nod. "That is so, isn't it?"

An angry flush appeared on Mrs. Boyle's face.

"What of it?" she demanded.

Metcalf said gravely:

"You were responsible for sending three children to Longridge Farm."

"Really, Major Metcalf, I don't see how I can be held responsible for what happened. The Farm people seemed very nice and were most anxious to have the children. I don't see that I was to blame in any way—or that I can be held responsible—" Her voice trailed off.

Giles said sharply:

"Why didn't you tell Sergeant Trotter this?"

"No business of the police," snapped Mrs. Boyle. "I can look after myself."

Major Metcalf said quietly:

"You'd better watch out."

Then he, too, left the room.

Molly murmured:

"Of course, you *were* the billeting officer. . . . I remember. . . ."

"Molly, did you know?" Giles stared at her.

"You had the big house on the common, didn't you?"

"Requisitioned," said Mrs. Boyle. "And completely ruined," she added bitterly. "*Devastated*. Iniquitous."

Then, very softly, Mr. Paravicini began to laugh. He threw his head back and laughed without restraint.

"You must forgive me," he gasped. "But, indeed, I find all this most amusing. I enjoy myself—yes, I enjoy myself greatly."

Sergeant Trotter re-entered the room at that moment. He threw a glance of disapproval at Mr. Paravicini.

"I'm glad," he said acidly, "that everyone finds this so funny."

"I apologize, my dear Inspector. I do apologize. I am spoiling the effect of your solemn warning."

Sergeant Trotter shrugged his shoulders.

"I've done my best to make the position clear," he said. "And I'm not an Inspector. I'm only a Sergeant. I'd like to use the telephone, please, Mrs. Davis."

"I abase myself," said Mr. Paravicini. "I creep away."

Far from creeping, he left the room with that jaunty and youthful step that Molly had noticed before.

"He's an odd fish," said Giles.

"Criminal type," said Trotter. "Wouldn't trust him a yard."

"Oh," cried Molly. "You think *he*—but he's far too old. . . . Or is he old at all? He uses make-up—quite a lot of it. And his walk is young. Perhaps he's made up to *look* old. Sergeant Trotter, do you think—"

Sergeant Trotter snubbed her severely.

"We shan't get anywhere with unprofitable speculation, Mrs. Davis," he said. "I must report to Superintendent Hogben."

He crossed to the telephone.

"But you can't," said Molly. "The telephone's dead."

"What?" Trotter swung round.

The sharp alarm in his voice impressed them all.

"Dead? Since when?"

"Major Metcalf tried it just before you came."

"But it was all right before that. You got Superintendent Hogben's message?"

"Yes. I suppose—since ten—the line's down—with the snow."

But Trotter's face remained grave.

"I wonder," he said. "It may have been—cut."

Molly stared.

"You think so?"

"I'm going to make sure."

He hurried out of the room. Giles hesitated, then went after him.

Molly exclaimed, "Good Heavens! Nearly lunch time, I must get on—or we'll have nothing to eat."

As she rushed from the room, Mrs. Boyle muttered:

"Incompetent chit! What a place. I shan't pay seven guineas for *this* kind of thing."

3

Sergeant Trotter bent down, following the wires. He asked Giles:

"Is there an extension?"

"Yes, in our bedroom upstairs. Shall I go up and see there?"

"If you please."

Trotter opened the window and leaned out, brushing snow from the sill.

Giles hurried up the stairs.

4

Mr. Paravicini was in the big drawing room. He went across to the grand piano and opened it. Sitting on the music stool, he picked out a tune softly with one finger.

Three Blind Mice

See how they run . . .

5

Christopher Wren was in his bedroom. He moved about it, whistling briskly. . . .

Suddenly the whistle wavered and died. He sat down on the edge of the bed. He buried his face in his hands and began to sob. . . . He murmured childishly: "I can't go on. . . ."

Then his mood changed. He stood up, squared his shoulders. "I've got to go on," he said. "I've got to go through with it."

6

Giles stood by the telephone in his and Molly's room. He bent down towards the skirting. One of Molly's gloves lay there. He picked it up. A pink bus ticket dropped out of it. . . . Giles stood looking down at it as it fluttered to the ground. Watching it, his face changed. . . .

It might have been a different man who walked slowly as though in a dream to the door, opened it, and stood a moment peering along the corridor towards the head of the stairs.

7

Molly finished the potatoes, threw them into the pot, and set the pot on the fire. She glanced into the oven. Everything was all set, going according to plan.

On the kitchen table was the two days old copy of the *Evening Standard*. She frowned as she looked at it. If she could only just *remember*. . . .

Suddenly her hands went to her eyes.

"Oh no," said Molly. "Oh *no*. . . ."

Slowly she took her hands away. She looked round the kitchen like someone looking at a strange place. So warm and comfortable and spacious, with its faint savoury smell of cooking.

"Oh *no*," she said again under her breath.

She moved slowly, like a sleep-walker, towards the door into the hall. She opened it. The house was silent except for someone whistling. . . .

That tune . . .

Molly shivered and retreated. She waited a minute or two, glancing once more round the familiar kitchen. Yes, everything was in order and progressing. . . .

She went once more towards the kitchen door. . . .

8

Major Metcalf came quietly down the back stairs. He waited a moment or two in the hall, then he opened the big cupboard under the stairs and peered in.

Everything seemed quiet. Nobody about. As good a time as any to do what he had set out to do. . . .

9

Mrs. Boyle, in the library, turned the knobs of the radio with some irritation.

Her first attempt had brought her into the middle of a talk on the origin and significance of nursery rhymes. The last thing she wanted to hear. Twirling impatiently, a cultured voice informed her:

"The psychology of fear must be thoroughly understood. Say you are alone in a room. A door opens softly behind you—"

A door did open. Mrs. Boyle, with a violent start, turned sharply.

"Oh, it's you," she said with relief. "Idiotic programmes they have on this thing. I can't find anything worth listening to!"

"I shouldn't bother to listen, Mrs. Boyle."

Mrs. Boyle snorted.

"What else is there for me to do?" she demanded. "Shut up in a house with a possible murderer—not that I believe *that* melodramatic story for a moment—"

"Don't you, Mrs. Boyle?"

"Why—what do you mean—"

The belt of the raincoat was slipped round her neck so quickly that she hardly realized its significance.

The knob of the radio amplifier was turned higher. The lecturer on the Psychology of Fear shouted his learned remarks into the room and drowned what incidental noises there were attendant on Mrs. Boyle's demise.

But there wasn't much noise.

The killer was too expert for that. . . .

CHAPTER VI

THEY WERE all huddled in the kitchen. On the gas cooker the potatoes bubbled merrily. The savoury smell from the oven of steak and kidney pie was stronger than ever.

Four shaken people stared at each other, the fifth, Molly, white and shivering, sipped at the glass of whisky that the sixth, Sergeant Trotter, had forced her to drink.

Sergeant Trotter himself, his face set and angry, looked round at the assembled people. Just five minutes had elapsed since Molly's terrified screams had brought him and the others racing to the library.

"She'd only just been killed when you got to her, Mrs. Davis," he said. "Are you sure you didn't see or hear anybody as you came across the hall?"

"Whistling," said Molly faintly, "—but that was earlier. I think—I'm not sure—I think I heard a door shut—softly, somewhere—just as I—as I—went into the library."

"Which door?"

"I don't know."

"Think, Mrs. Davis—try and *think*—upstairs—downstairs—right, left . . . ?"

"I don't *know*, I tell you," cried Molly. "I'm not even sure I heard anything."

"Can't you stop bullying her?" said Giles angrily. "Can't you see she's all in?"

"I'm investigating a murder, Mr. Davis—I beg your pardon, *Commander Davis*."

"I don't use my war rank, Sergeant."

"Quite so, sir." Trotter paused, as though he had made some subtle point. "As I say, I'm investigating a murder. Up to now nobody has taken this thing seriously. Mrs. Boyle didn't. She held out on me with information. You all held out on me. Well, Mrs. Boyle is dead. Unless we get to the bottom of this—and quickly, mind, there may be another death."

"Another? Nonsense. Why?"

"Because," said Sergeant Trotter gravely, "there were three little blind mice. . . ."

Giles said incredulously: "A death for each of them? But there would have to be a connection—I mean another connection with the case."

"Yes, there would have to be that."

"But why another death *here*?"

"Because there were only two addresses in the notebook. There was only one possible victim at 74, Culver Street. She's dead. But at Monkswell Manor there is a wider field."

"Nonsense, Trotter, it would be a most unlikely coincidence that there should be two people brought here by chance, both of them with a share in the Longridge Farm case."

"Given certain circumstances, it wouldn't be so much of a coincidence. Think it out, Mr. Davis."

He turned towards the others.

"I've had your accounts of where you all were when Mrs. Boyle was killed. I'll check them over— You were in your room, Mr. Wren, when you heard Mrs. Davis scream?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Mr. Davis, you were upstairs in your bedroom examining the telephone extension there?"

"Yes," said Giles.

"Mr. Paravicini was in the drawing room playing tunes on the piano. Nobody heard you, by the way, Mr. Paravicini?"

"I was playing very, very softly, Sergeant, just with one finger."

"What tune was it?"

"Three Blind Mice, Sergeant." He smiled. "The same tune that Mr. Wren was whistling upstairs. The tune that's running through everybody's head."

"It's a horrid tune," said Molly.

"How about the telephone wire?" asked Metcalf. "Was it deliberately cut?"

"Yes, Major Metcalf. A section had been cut out just outside the dining room window—I had just located the break when Mrs. Davis screamed."

"But it's crazy. How can he hope to get away with it?" demanded Christopher shrilly.

The Sergeant measured him carefully with his eye.

"Perhaps he doesn't very much care about that," he said. "Or again he may be quite sure he's too clever for us. Murderers get like that." He added: "We take a psychology course, you know, in our training. A schizophrenic's mentality is very interesting."

"Shall we cut out the long words?" said Giles.

"Certainly, Mr. Davis. Two six letter words are all that concern us at the moment. One's *murder* and the other's *danger*. That's what we've got to concentrate upon. Now, Major Metcalf, let me be quite clear about your movements. You say you were in the *cellar*— Why?"

"Looking around," said the Major. "I looked in that cupboard place under the stairs and then I noticed a door there and I opened it and saw a flight of steps, so I went down them. Nice cellars, you've got," he said to Giles. "Crypt of an old monastery, I should say."

"We're not engaged in antiquarian research, Major Metcalf. We're investigating a murder. Will you listen a moment, Mrs. Davis? I'll leave the kitchen door open." He went out, a door shut with a faint creak. "Is that what you heard, Mrs. Davis?" he asked as he reappeared in the open doorway.

"I—it does sound like it."

"That was the cupboard under the stairs. It could be, you know, that after killing Mrs. Boyle, the murderer, retreating across the hall, heard you coming out of the kitchen, and slipped into the cupboard, pulling the door to after him."

"Then his fingerprints will be on the inside of the cupboard," cried Christopher.

"Mine are there already," said Major Metcalf.

"Quite so," said Sergeant Trotter. "But we've a satisfactory explanation for those, haven't we?" he added smoothly.

"Look here, Sergeant," said Giles, "admittedly you're in charge of this affair. But this is my house, and in a certain degree I feel responsible for the people staying in it. Oughtn't we to take precautionary measures?"

"Such as, Mr. Davis?"

"Well, to be frank, putting under restraint the person who seems pretty clearly indicated as the chief suspect."

He looked straight at Christopher Wren.

Christopher Wren sprang forward, his voice rose, shrill and hysterical.

"It's not true! It's not *true*! You're all against me. . . . Everyone's always against me. You're going to frame me for this. It's persecution—persecution—"

"Steady on, lad," said Major Metcalf.

"It's all right, Chris." Molly came forward. She put her hand on his arm. "Nobody's against you. Tell him it's all right," she said to Sergeant Trotter.

"We don't frame people," said Sergeant Trotter.

"Tell him you're not going to arrest him."

"I'm not going to arrest anyone. To do that, I need evidence. There's no evidence—at present."

Giles cried out:

"I think you're crazy, Molly. And you, too, Sergeant. There's only one person who fits the bill, and—"

"Wait, Giles, wait—" Molly broke in. "Oh, do be quiet. Sergeant Trotter, can I—can I speak to you a minute?"

"I'm staying," said Giles.

"No, Giles, you too, please."

Giles' face grew as dark as thunder. He said:

"I don't know what's come over you, Molly."

He followed the others out of the room, banging the door behind him.

"Yes, Mrs. Davis, what is it?"

"Sergeant Trotter, when you told us about the Longridge Farm case, you seemed to think that it must be the eldest boy who is—responsible for all this. But you don't *know* that?"

"That's perfectly true, Mrs. Davis. But the probabilities lie that way—mental instability, desertion from the Army, psychiatrist's report."

"Oh, I know, and therefore it all seems to point to Christopher. But I don't believe it *is* Christopher. There must be other—possibilities. Hadn't those three children any relations—parents, for instance?"

"Yes. The mother was dead. But the father was serving abroad."

"Well, what about him? Where is *he* now?"

"We've no information. He obtained his demobilization papers last year."

"And if the son was mentally unstable, the father may have been, too."

"That is so."

"So the murderer may be middle-aged or old. Major Metcalf, remember, was frightfully upset when I told him the police had rung up. He really *was*."

Sergeant Trotter said quietly:

"Please believe me, Mrs. Davis, I've had all the possibilities in mind since the beginning. The boy Jim—the father—even the sister. It *could* have been a woman, you know. I haven't overlooked anything. I may be pretty sure in

my own mind—but I don't *know*—yet. It's very hard really to know about anything or anyone—especially in these days. You'd be surprised what we see in the Police Force. With marriages, especially. Hasty marriages—war marriages. There's no background, you see. No families or relations to meet. People accept each other's word. Fellow says he's a Fighter-Pilot or an Army Major—the girl believes him implicitly. Sometimes she doesn't find out for a year or two that he's an absconding bank clerk with a wife and family, or an Army—deserter.”

He paused and went on:

“I know quite well what's in your mind, Mrs. Davis. There's just one thing I'd like to say to you. *The murderer's enjoying himself*. That's the one thing I'm quite sure of.”

He went towards the door.

3

Molly stood very straight and still, a red flush burning in her cheeks. After standing rigid for a moment or two, she moved slowly towards the stove, knelt down and opened the oven door. A savoury familiar smell came towards her. Her heart lightened. It was as though, suddenly, she had been wafted back into the dear familiar world of everyday things. Cooking, house-work, home making, ordinary prosaic living. . . .

So, from time immemorial women had cooked food for their men. The world of danger—of madness, receded. Woman, in her kitchen, was safe . . . eternally safe.

The kitchen door opened. She turned her head as Christopher Wren entered. He was a little breathless.

“My dear,” he said. “*Such* ructions! Somebody's stolen the Sergeant's skis!”

“The Sergeant's skis? But why should anyone want to do that?”

“I really can't imagine. I mean, if the Sergeant decided to go away and leave us, I should imagine that the murderer would be only too pleased. I mean, it really doesn't make *sense*, does it?”

“Giles put them in the cupboard under the stairs.”

“Well, they're not there now. Intriguing, isn't it?”

He laughed gleefully.

“The Sergeant's awfully angry about it. Snapping like a turtle. He's been pitching into poor Major Metcalf. The old boy sticks to it that he didn't notice whether they were there or not when he looked into the cupboard just before Mrs. Boyle was murdered. Trotter says he *must* have noticed. If you ask me,” Christopher lowered his voice and leaned forward, “this business is beginning to get Trotter down.”

“It's getting us all down,” said Molly.

“Not me. I find it most stimulating. It's all so delightfully unreal.”

Molly said sharply:

"You wouldn't say that if—if you'd been the one to find her. Mrs. Boyle, I mean. I keep thinking of it . . . I can't forget it. . . . Her face—all swollen and purple. . . ."

She shivered. Christopher came across to her. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"I know. I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. I didn't think."

A dry sob rose in Molly's throat.

"It seemed all right just now—cooking—the kitchen," she spoke confusedly, incoherently. "And then, suddenly—it was all back again—like a nightmare."

There was a curious expression on Christopher Wren's face as he stood there looking down on her bent head.

"I see," he said. "I see."

He moved away.

"Well, I'd better clear out and—not interrupt you."

Molly cried "Don't go!" just as his hand was on the door handle.

He turned round looking at her questioningly. Then he came slowly back.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Mean what?"

"You definitely don't want me to—go?"

"No, I tell you. I don't want to be alone. I'm afraid to be alone."

Christopher sat down by the table. Molly bent to the oven, lifted the pie to a higher shelf, shut the oven door and came and joined him.

"That's very interesting," said Christopher in a level voice.

"What is?"

"That you're not afraid to be—alone with me. You're not, are you?"

She shook her head.

"No, I'm not."

"Why aren't you afraid, Molly?"

"I don't know . . . I'm not. . . ."

"And yet I'm the only person who—fits the bill. One murderer as per schedule."

"No," said Molly. "There are—other possibilities. I've been talking to Sergeant Trotter about them."

"Did he agree with you?"

"He didn't disagree," said Molly slowly. . . .

Certain words sounded over and over again in her head. Especially that last phrase: "*I know exactly what's in your mind, Mrs. Davis.*" But did he? Could he possibly know?

He had said, too, that the murderer was enjoying himself. . . . Was that true?

She said to Christopher:

"You're not exactly enjoying yourself, are you? In spite of what you said just now."

"Good God, no," said Christopher staring. . . . "What a very odd thing to say."

"Oh, I didn't say it. Sergeant Trotter did. I hate that man! He—he puts things into your head—things that aren't true—that can't possibly be true."

She put her hands to her head, covering her eyes with them. Very gently Christopher took those hands away.

"Look here, Molly," he said, "what is all this?"

She let him force her gently into a chair by the kitchen table. His manner was no longer hysterical or childish.

"What's the matter, Molly?" he said.

Molly looked at him—a long appraising glance. She asked irrelevantly:

"How long have I known you, Christopher? Two days?"

"Just about. You're thinking, aren't you, that though it's such a short time, we seem to know each other rather well?"

"Yes—it's odd, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . There's a kind of sympathy between us. Possibly because we've both—been up against it."

It was not a question. It was a statement. Molly let it pass.

She said very quietly; and again it was a statement rather than a question:

"Your name isn't really Christopher Wren, is it?"

"No."

"Why did you—"

"Choose that? Oh, it seemed rather a pleasant whimsy. They used to jeer at me and call me Christopher Robin at school. Robin—Wren—association of ideas, I suppose."

"What's your real name?"

Christopher said quietly: "I don't think we'll go into that. . . . It wouldn't mean anything to you. . . . I'm not an architect. Actually, I'm a deserter from the Army. . . ."

Just for a moment swift alarm leapt into Molly's eyes. Christopher saw it.

"Yes," he said. "Just like our unknown murderer. I told you I was the only one the specification fitted."

"Don't be stupid," said Molly. "I told you I didn't believe you were the murderer. Go on—tell me about yourself. . . . What made you desert—nerves?"

"Being afraid, you mean? No, curiously enough, I wasn't afraid—not more than anyone else, that is to say. Actually I got a reputation for being rather cool under fire. No, it was something quite different. It was—my mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes—you see, she was killed—in an air raid. Buried. They—they had to dig

her out. I don't know what happened to me when I heard about it—I suppose I went a little mad. I thought, you see, it had happened to *me*. . . . I felt I had to get home quickly and—and dig myself out—I can't explain—it was all confused." He lowered his head to his hands and spoke in a muffled voice. "I wandered about a long time, looking for her—or for myself—I don't know which. And then, when my mind cleared up, I was afraid to go back—or to report—I knew I could never explain. . . . Since then, I've just been—nothing."

He stared at her, his young face hollow with despair.

"You mustn't feel like that," said Molly gently. "You can start again."

"Can one ever do that?"

"Of course—you're quite young."

"Yes, but you see—I've come to the end."

"No," said Molly. "You haven't come to the end, you only think you have. I believe everyone has that feeling once at least in their lives—that it's the end, that they can't go on."

"You've had it, haven't you, Molly? You must have—to be able to speak like that."

"Yes."

"What was yours?"

"Mine was just what happened to a lot of people. I was engaged to a young fighter pilot—and he was killed."

"Wasn't there more to it than that?"

"I suppose there was. I'd had a nasty shock when I was younger. I came up against something that was rather cruel and beastly . . . it predisposed me to think that life was always—horrible. When Jack was killed it just confirmed my belief that the whole of life was cruel and treacherous. . . ."

"I know. . . . And then, I suppose," said Christopher, watching her, "Giles came along. . . ."

"Yes," he saw the smile, tender, almost shy, that trembled on her mouth, "Giles came—everything felt right and safe and happy . . . Giles!"

The smile fled from her lips. Her face was suddenly stricken. She shivered as though with cold.

"What's the matter, Molly? What's frightening you? You *are* frightened, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"And it's something to do with Giles? Something he's said or done?"

"It's not Giles, really, it's that horrible man!"

"What horrible man?" Christopher was surprised. "Paravicini?"

"No, *no*, Sergeant Trotter."

"Sergeant Trotter?"

"Suggesting things—hinting things . . . putting horrible thoughts into my

mind about Giles—thoughts that I didn't know were there. Oh I hate him—I hate him."

Christopher's eyebrows rose in slow surprise.

"Giles? *Giles!* Yes, of course, he and I are much of an age. He seems to me much older than I am—but I suppose he isn't really. Yes, Giles might fit the bill equally well. But look here, Molly, that's all nonsense. Giles was down here with you the day that woman was killed in London."

Molly did not answer. Christopher looked at her sharply.

"Wasn't he here?"

Molly spoke breathlessly, the words coming out in an incoherent jumble.

"He was out all day—in the car—he went over to the other side of the county about some wire netting in a sale there—at least that's what he said—that's what I thought—until . . . until . . ."

"Until what?"

Slowly Molly's hand reached out and traced the date of the *Evening Standard* that covered a portion of the kitchen table.

Christopher looked at it and said:

"London edition, two days ago."

"It was in Giles' pocket when he came back. He—he must have been in London."

Christopher stared. He stared at the paper and he stared at Molly. He pursed up his lips and began to whistle, then checked himself abruptly. It wouldn't do to whistle that tune just now. Choosing his words very carefully, and avoiding her eye, he said:

"How much do you actually—know about Giles?"

"Don't," cried Molly. "Don't! That's just what that beast Trotter said—or hinted. That women often didn't know anything about the men that they married—especially in war time. They—they just took the man's own account of himself. . . ."

"That's true enough, I suppose."

"Don't *you* say it, too! I can't bear it. It's just because we're all in such a state, so worked up. We'd—we'd believe *any* fantastic suggestion— It's not true! I—"

She stopped. The kitchen door had opened.

Giles came in. There was rather a grim look on his face.

"Am I interrupting anything?" he asked.

Christopher slipped from the table.

"I'm just taking a few cookery lessons," he said.

"Indeed? Well, look here, Wren, tête-à-têtes aren't very healthy things at the present time. You keep out of the kitchen, do you hear?"

"Oh but surely—"

"You keep away from my wife, Wren. She's not going to be the next victim."

"That," said Christopher, "is just what I'm worrying about."

If there was significance in the words, Giles did not apparently notice them. He merely turned a rather darker shade of brick red.

"I'll do the worrying," he said. "I can look after my own wife. Get the hell out of here."

Molly said in a clear voice:

"Please go, Christopher. Yes—really."

Christopher moved slowly towards the door.

"I shan't go very far," he said, and the words were addressed to Molly and held a very definite meaning.

"Will you get out of here?"

Christopher gave a high childish giggle.

"Ay, ay, Commander," he said.

The door shut behind him. Giles turned on Molly.

"For God's sake, Molly, haven't you got *any* sense? Shut in here alone with a dangerous homicidal maniac!"

"He isn't the—" she changed her phrase quickly—"he isn't dangerous. Anyway, I'm on my guard. I can—look after myself."

Giles laughed unpleasantly.

"So could Mrs. Boyle."

"Oh Giles, *don't*."

"Sorry, my dear. But I'm het up. That wretched boy. What you see in him I can't imagine."

Molly said slowly, "I'm sorry for him."

"Sorry for a homicidal lunatic?"

Molly gave him a curious glance.

"I could be sorry for a homicidal lunatic," she said.

"Calling him Christopher, too. Since when have you been on Christian name terms?"

"Oh, Giles, don't be ridiculous. Everyone always uses Christian names nowadays. You know they do."

"Even after a couple of days? But perhaps it's more than that. Perhaps you knew Mr. Christopher Wren, the phony architect, before he came here? Perhaps you suggested to him that he *should* come here? Perhaps you cooked it all up between you?"

Molly stared at him.

"Giles, have you gone out of your mind? What on earth are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that Christopher Wren is an old friend, that you're on rather closer terms with him than you'd like me to know."

"Giles, you must be crazy!"

"I suppose you'll stick to it that you never saw him until he walked in here. Rather odd that he should come and stay in an out of the way place like this, isn't it?"

"Is it any odder than that Major Metcalf and—and Mrs. Boyle should?"

"Yes—I think it is. . . . I've always read that these murmuring loonies had a peculiar fascination for women. Looks as though it were true. How did you get to know him? How long has this been going on?"

"You're being absolutely absurd, Giles. I never saw Christopher Wren until he arrived here."

"You didn't go up to London to meet him two days ago and fix up to meet here as strangers?"

"You know perfectly well, Giles, I haven't been up to London for weeks."

"Haven't you? That's interesting." He fished a fur-lined glove out of his pocket and held it out. "That's one of the gloves you were wearing day before yesterday, isn't it? The day I was over at Sailham getting the netting."

"The day you were over at Sailham getting the netting," said Molly, eyeing him steadily. "Yes, I wore those gloves when I went out."

"You went to the village, you said. If you only went to the village, what is this doing inside that glove?"

Accusingly, he held out a pink bus ticket.

There was a moment's silence.

"You went to London," said Giles.

"All right," said Molly, her chin shot up. "I went to London."

"To meet this chap Christopher Wren."

"No, not to meet Christopher."

"Then why did you go?"

"Just at the moment, Giles," said Molly, "I'm not going to tell you."

"Meaning you'll give yourself time to think up a good story!"

"I think," said Molly—"that I hate you!"

"I don't hate you," said Giles slowly. "But I almost wish I did . . . I simply feel that—I don't know you any more . . . I don't know anything about you. . . ."

"I feel the same," said Molly. "You—you're just a stranger. A man who lies to me—"

"When have I ever lied to you?"

Molly laughed.

"Do you think I believed that story of yours about the wire netting? . . . You were in London, too, that day. . . ."

"I suppose you saw me there," said Giles. "And you didn't trust me enough—"

"Trust you? I'll never trust anyone—ever—again. . . ."

Neither of them had noticed the soft opening of the kitchen door. Mr. Paravicini gave a little cough.

"So embarrassing," he murmured. "I do hope you young people are not both saying just a little more than you mean? One is so apt to in these lovers' quarrels."

"Lovers' quarrels," said Giles derisively. "That's good."

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr. Paravicini. "I know just how you feel. I have been through all this myself when I was a younger man. But what I came to say was that the Inspector person is simply insisting that we should all come into the drawing room. It appears that he has an idea."

Mr. Paravicini sniggered gently.

"The police have a clue—yes, one hears that frequently. But an *idea*? I very much doubt it. A zealous and painstaking officer, no doubt, our Sergeant Trotter, but not, I think, over-endowed with brains."

"Go on, Giles," said Molly. "I've got the cooking to see to. Sergeant Trotter can do without me."

"Talking of cooking," said Mr. Paravicini, skipping nimbly across the kitchen to Molly's side, "have you ever tried chicken livers served on toast that has been thickly spread with *foie gras* and a very thin rasher of bacon smeared with French mustard?"

"One doesn't see much *foie gras* nowadays," said Giles. "Come on, Paravicini."

"Shall I stay and assist you, dear lady?"

"You come along to the drawing room, Paravicini," said Giles.

Mr. Paravicini laughed softly.

"Your husband is afraid for you. Quite natural. He doesn't fancy the idea of leaving you alone with *me*. It is my sadistic tendencies he fears—not my dishonourable ones. I yield to force." He bowed gracefully and kissed the tips of his fingers.

Molly said uncomfortably: "Oh, Mr. Paravicini, I'm sure—"

Mr. Paravicini shook his head. He said to Giles:

"You're very wise, young man. *Take no chances*. Can I prove to you—or to the Inspector for that matter—that I am not a homicidal maniac? No, I cannot. Negatives are such difficult things to prove."

He hummed cheerfully. Molly flinched.

"Please, Mr. Paravicini—not that horrible tune."

"Three Blind Mice—so it was! The tune has got into my head. Now I come to think of it, it is a gruesome little rhyme. Not a nice little rhyme at all. But children like gruesome things. You may have noticed that? That rhyme is very English—the bucolic cruel English countryside. *She cut off their tails with a carving knife*. Of course a child would love that—I could tell you things about children—"

"Please don't," said Molly faintly. "I think you're cruel, too." Her voice rose hysterically. "You laugh and smile—you're like a cat playing with a mouse . . . playing. . . ."

She began to laugh.

"Steady, Molly," said Giles. "Come along, we'll all go into the drawing room together. Trotter will be getting impatient. Never mind the cooking. Murder is more important than food."

"I'm not sure that I agree with you," said Mr. Paravicini as he followed them with little skipping steps. "The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast—that's what they always say."

4

Christopher Wren joined them in the hall and received a scowl from Giles. He looked at Molly with a quick anxious glance, but Molly, her head held high, walked looking straight ahead of her.

They marched almost like a procession to the drawing room door. Mr. Paravicini brought up the rear with his little skipping steps.

Sergeant Trotter and Major Metcalf were standing waiting in the drawing room. The Major was looking sulky. Sergeant Trotter was looking flushed and energetic.

"That's right," he said, as they entered. "I wanted you all together. I want to make a certain experiment—and for that I shall require your co-operation."

"Will it take long?" Molly asked. "I'm rather busy in the kitchen. After all, we've got to have a meal sometime."

"Yes," said Trotter. "I appreciate that, Mrs. Davis. But, if you'll excuse me, there are more important things than meals! Mrs. Boyle, for instance, won't need another meal."

"Really, Sergeant," said Major Metcalf, "that's an extraordinarily tactless way of putting things."

"I'm sorry, Major Metcalf, but I want everyone to co-operate in this."

"Have you found your skis, Sergeant Trotter?" asked Molly.

The young man reddened.

"No, I have not, Mrs. Davis. But I may say I have a very shrewd suspicion who took them. And of why they were taken. I won't say any more at present."

"Please don't," begged Mr. Paravicini. "I always think explanations should be kept to the very end—that exciting last chapter, you know."

"This isn't a game, sir."

"Isn't it? Now there I think you're wrong. I think it *is* a game—to somebody."

"The *murderer* is enjoying himself," murmured Molly softly.

The others looked at her in astonishment. She flushed.

"I'm only quoting what Sergeant Trotter said to me."

Sergeant Trotter did not look too pleased.

"It's all very well Mr. Paravicini mentioning last chapters and speaking as though this was a mystery thriller," he said. "This is real. This is happening."

"So long," said Christopher Wren, fingering his neck gingerly, "as it doesn't happen to me."

"Now then," said Major Metcalf. "None of that, young fellow. The Sergeant here is going to tell us just what he wants us to do."

Sergeant Trotter cleared his throat. His voice became official.

"I took certain statements from you all a short time ago," he said. "Those statements related to your positions at the time when the murder of Mrs. Boyle occurred. Mr. Wren and Mr. Davis were in their separate bedrooms. Mrs. Davis was in the kitchen. Major Metcalf was in the cellar. Mr. Paravicini was here in this room. . . ."

He paused and then went on.

"Those are the statements you made. I have no means of checking those statements. They may be true—they may not. To put it quite clearly—four of those statements are true—but *one of them is false*. Which one?"

He looked from face to face. Nobody spoke.

"Four of you are speaking the truth—one is lying. I have a plan that may help me to discover the liar. And if I discover that one of you lied to me—then I know who the murderer is."

Giles said sharply:

"Not necessarily. Someone might have lied—for some other reason."

"I rather doubt that, Mr. Davis."

"But what's the idea, man? You've just said you've no means of checking these statements?"

"No, but supposing everyone was to go through these movements a second time."

"Bah," said Major Metcalf disparagingly. "Reconstruction of the crime. Foreign idea."

"Not a reconstruction of the *crime*, Major Metcalf. A reconstruction of the movements of apparently innocent persons."

"And what do you expect to learn from that?"

"You will forgive me if I don't make that clear just at the moment."

"You want," asked Molly, "a repeat performance?"

"More or less, Mrs. Davis."

There was a silence. It was, somehow, an uneasy silence.

"It's a trap," thought Molly. "It's a trap . . . but I can't see *how*. . . ."

You might have thought that there were five guilty people in the room, instead of one guilty and four innocent ones. One and all cast doubtful sideways glances at the assured smiling young man who proposed this innocent sounding manoeuvre.

Christopher burst out shrilly:

"But I don't see—I simply can't see—what you can possibly hope to find out—just by making people do the same thing they did before. It seems to me just nonsense!"

"Does it, Mr. Wren?"

"Of course," said Giles slowly, "what you say, goes, Sergeant. We'll co-operate. Are we all to do exactly what we did before?"

"The same actions will be performed, yes."

A faint ambiguity in the phrase made Major Metcalf look up sharply. Sergeant Trotter went on:

"Mr. Paravicini has told us that he sat at the piano and played a certain tune. Perhaps, Mr. Paravicini, you would kindly show us exactly what you did do?"

"But certainly, my dear Sergeant."

Mr. Paravicini skipped nimbly across the room to the Grand piano and settled himself on the music stool.

"The *maestro* at the piano will play the signature tune to a murder," he said with a flourish.

He grinned, and with elaborate mannerisms, he picked out with one finger the tune of Three Blind Mice. . . .

"He's enjoying himself," thought Molly. "*He's enjoying himself.* . . ."

In the big room the soft muted notes had an almost eerie effect. . . .

"Thank you, Mr. Paravicini," said Sergeant Trotter. "That, I take it, is exactly how you played the tune on the—former occasion?"

"Yes, Sergeant, it is. I repeated it three times."

Sergeant Trotter turned to Molly.

"Do you play the piano, Mrs. Davis?"

"Yes, Sergeant Trotter."

"Could you pick out the tune, as Mr. Paravicini has done, playing it in exactly the same manner?"

"Certainly I could."

"Then will you go and sit at the piano and be ready to do so when I give the signal?"

Molly looked slightly bewildered. Then she crossed slowly to the piano.

Mr. Paravicini rose from the piano stool with a shrill protest.

"But Sergeant, I understood that we were each to repeat our former roles. I was at the piano here."

"The same actions will be performed as on the former occasion—but *they will not necessarily be performed by the same people.*"

"I—don't see the point of that," said Giles.

"There is a point, Mr. Davis. It is a means of checking up on the original statements—and I may say of *one* statement in particular. Now then, please.

I will assign you your various stations. Mrs. Davis will be here—at the piano. Mr. Wren, will you kindly go to the kitchen? Just keep an eye on Mrs. Davis's dinner. Mr. Paravicini, will you go to Mr. Wren's bedroom? There you can exercise your musical talents by whistling *Three Blind Mice* just as he did. Major Metcalf, will you go up to Mr. Davis's bedroom and examine the telephone there? And you, Mr. Davis, will you look into the cupboard in the hall and then go down to the cellar?"

There was a moment's silence. Then four people moved slowly towards the door. Trotter followed them. He looked over his shoulder.

"Count up to fifty and then begin to play, Mrs. Davis," he said.

He followed the others out. Before the door closed Molly heard Mr. Paravicini's voice say shrilly:

"I never knew the police were so fond of parlour games. . . ."

5

"Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty."

Obediently, the counting finished, Molly began to play. . . .

Again the soft cruel little tune crept out into the big echoing room. . . .

Three Blind Mice

See how they run . . .

Molly felt her heart beating faster and faster. As Paravicini had said, it was a strangely haunting and gruesome little rhyme. It had that childish incomprehension of pity which is so terrifying if met with in an adult.

Very faintly, from upstairs, she could hear the same tune being whistled in the bedroom above . . . Paravicini enacting the part of Christopher Wren.

Suddenly, next door, the wireless went on in the library. Sergeant Trotter must have set that going. He himself, then, was playing the part of Mrs. Boyle. . . .

But why? What was the point of it all? Where was the trap? For there was a trap, of that she was certain. . . .

A draught of cold air blew across the back of her neck. She turned her head sharply. Surely the door had opened? Someone had come into the room . . . ? No, the room was empty. But suddenly she felt nervous—afraid. If someone *should* come in. Supposing Mr. Paravicini should skip round the door, should come skipping over to the piano, his long fingers twitching and twisting. . . .

"So you are playing your own funeral march, dear lady, a happy thought. . . ."

Nonsense—don't be stupid—don't imagine things. . . . Besides, you can hear him whistling over your head. Just as he can hear you.

She almost took her fingers off the piano as the idea came to her! Nobody

had heard Mr. Paravicini playing. Was that the trap? Was it, perhaps, possible that Mr. Paravicini hadn't been playing at all? That he had been, not in the drawing room, but in the library. In the library, strangling Mrs. Boyle. . . .

He had been annoyed, very annoyed, when Trotter had arranged for her to play. He had laid stress on the softness with which he had picked out the tune. Of course, he had emphasized the softness in the hopes that it would be too soft to be heard outside the room. Because if anyone heard it this time who hadn't heard it last time—why then, Trotter would have got what he wanted—the person who had lied.

The door of the drawing room opened. Molly, strung up to expect Paravicini, nearly screamed. But it was only Sergeant Trotter who entered, just as she finished the third repetition of the tune.

"Thank you, Mrs. Davis," he said.

He was looking extremely pleased with himself, and his manner was brisk and confident.

Molly took her hands from the keys.

"Have you got what you wanted?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed." His voice was exultant. "I've got exactly what I wanted."

"Which? Who?"

"Don't you know, Mrs. Davis? Come, now—it's not so difficult. By the way, you've been, if I may say so, extraordinarily foolish. You've left me hunting about for the third victim. As a result, you've been in serious danger."

"Me? I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that you haven't been honest with me, Mrs. Davis. You held out on me—just as Mrs. Boyle held out on me."

"I don't understand."

"Oh yes, you do. Why, when I first mentioned the Longridge Farm case, *you knew all about it*. Oh yes, you did. You were upset. And it was you who confirmed that Mrs. Boyle was the billeting officer for this part of the country. Both you and she came from these parts. So when I began to speculate who the third victim was likely to be, I plumped at once for you. You'd shown first-hand knowledge of the Longridge Farm business. We policemen aren't so dumb as we look, you know."

Molly said in a low voice,

"You don't understand. I didn't want to remember."

"I can understand that." His voice changed a little. "Your maiden name was Wainwright, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And you're just a little older than you pretend to be. In 1940, when this thing happened, you were the schoolteacher at Abbeyvale school."

"No!"

"Oh yes, you were, Mrs. Davis."

"I wasn't, I tell you."

"The child who died managed to get a letter posted to you. He stole a stamp. The letter begged for help—help from his kind teacher. It's a teacher's business to find out why a child doesn't come to school. You didn't find out. You ignored the poor little devil's letter."

"Stop." Molly's cheeks were flaming. "It's my sister you are talking about. She was the schoolmistress. And she didn't ignore his letter. She was ill—with pneumonia. She never saw the letter until after the child was dead. It upset her dreadfully—dreadfully—she was a terribly sensitive person. But it wasn't her fault. It's because she took it to heart so dreadfully that I've never been able to bear being reminded of it. It's been a nightmare to me, always."

Molly's hands went to her eyes, covering them. When she took them away, Trotter was staring at her.

He said softly:

"So it was your sister. . . . Well, after all—" He gave a sudden queer smile, "It doesn't much matter, does it? Your sister—*my* brother. . . ."

He took something out of his pocket. He was smiling now, happily.

Molly stared at the object he held.

"I always thought the police didn't carry revolvers," she said.

"*The police don't* . . ." said the young man.

He went on:

"But you see, Mrs. Davis, *I'm not a policeman*. I'm Jim. I'm Georgie's brother. You thought I was a policeman because I rang up from the call box in the village and said that Sergeant Trotter was on his way. Then I cut the telephone wires outside the house when I got here, so that you shouldn't be able to ring back to the police station. . . ."

Molly stared at him. The revolver was pointing at her now.

"Don't move, Mrs. Davis—and don't scream—or I pull the trigger at once. . . ."

He was still smiling. It was, Molly realized with horror, a child's smile. . . . And his voice, when he spoke, was becoming a child's voice.

"Yes," he said, "I'm Georgie's brother. Georgie died at Longridge Farm. That nasty woman sent us there and the farmer's wife was cruel to us, and you wouldn't help us . . . three little blind mice. I said then I'd kill you all when I grew up. I meant it. I've thought of it ever since."

He frowned suddenly.

"They bothered me a lot in the Army—that doctor kept asking me questions . . . I had to get away . . . I was afraid they'd stop me doing what I wanted to do. But I'm grown up now. Grown-ups can do what they like."

Molly pulled herself together. "Talk to him," she said to herself. "Distract his mind."

"But, Jim, listen," she said. "You'll never get safely away."

His face clouded over.

"Somebody's hidden my skis. I can't find them." He laughed. "But I daresay it will be all right. It's your husband's revolver. I took it out of his drawer. I daresay they'll think *he* shot you. Anyway—I don't much care. It's been such fun—all of it. Pretending! That woman in London, her face when she recognized me. That stupid woman this morning!"

He nodded his head.

Clearly, with eerie effect, came a whistle. Someone whistling the tune of Three Blind Mice. . . .

Trotter started, the revolver wavered—a voice shouted:

"Down, Mrs. Davis."

Molly dropped to the floor as Major Metcalf, rising from behind the concealment of the sofa by the door flung himself upon Trotter. The revolver went off—and the bullet lodged in one of the somewhat mediocre oil paintings dear to the heart of the late Miss Emory.

A moment later, all was pandemonium—Giles rushed in, followed by Christopher and Mr. Paravicini.

Major Metcalf, retaining his grasp of Trotter, spoke in short explosive sentences.

"Came in while you were playing—slipped behind the sofa— I've been on to him from the beginning—that's to say, I knew he wasn't a police officer. I'm a police officer—Inspector Tanner. We arranged with Metcalf I should take his place. Scotland Yard thought it advisable to have someone on the spot. Now, my lad—" He spoke quite gently to the now docile Trotter. "You come with me. . . . No one will hurt you. You'll be all right. We'll look after you."

In a piteous child's voice the bronzed young man asked:

"Georgie won't be angry with me?"

Metcalf said: "No, Georgie won't be angry."

He murmured to Giles as he passed him, "Mad as a hatter, poor devil."

They went out together. Mr. Paravicini touched Christopher Wren on the arm.

"You also, my friend," he said, "come with me."

Giles and Molly, left alone, looked at each other. In another moment they were in each other's arms.

"Darling," said Giles, "you're sure he didn't hurt you?"

"No, no, I'm quite all right. Giles, I've been so terribly mixed up. I almost thought you—why did you go to London that day?"

"Darling, I wanted to get you an anniversary present, for tomorrow. I didn't want you to know."

"How extraordinary! I went to London to get *you* a present and I didn't want you to know."

"I was insanely jealous of that neurotic ass. I must have been mad—forgive me, darling."

The door opened and Mr. Paravicini skipped in in his goat-like way. He was beaming.

"Interrupting the reconciliation— Such a charming scene— But alas, I must bid you *adieu*. A police jeep has managed to get through. I shall persuade them to take me with them." He bent and whispered mysteriously in Molly's ear, "I may have a few embarrassments in the near future—but I am confident I can arrange matters, and if you should receive a case—with a goose, say, a turkey, some tins of *foie gras*, a ham—some nylon stockings, yes?— Well, you understand, it will be with my compliments to a very charming lady. Mr. Davis, my cheque is on the hall table."

He kissed Molly's hand and skipped to the door.

"Nylons?" murmured Molly. "*Foie gras*? Who is Mr. Paravicini? Santa Claus?"

"Black market style, I suspect," said Giles.

Christopher Wren poked a diffident head in.

"My dears," he said, "I hope I'm not intruding, but there's a terrible smell of burning from the kitchen. Ought I to *do* something about it?"

With an anguished cry of, "MY PIE!" Molly fled from the room.

